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Section B: Teacher Education

A Case for Incorporating Aboriginal Perspectives in Education

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In general, education in Australia is dominated by an out-of-date worldview that encourages fragmentation and actively excludes the philosophical views of its Aboriginal Australian students. Despite growing support for the principles and practice of equal opportunity and multi-culturalism, for Aboriginal Australians to benefit from education they are left with little choice but to participate in teaching programs that devalue or ignore their cultural identity. To meet the needs of students, education must undergo a philosophical transformation that makes the structure and content of academic programs more culturally sensitive and flexible. All students need to develop cross-cultural skills, including ways of thinking in terms of interconnectedness and cultural relativity within the dominant culture. Students need to be prepared to work within differing cultural paradigms and to have an understanding of the philosophical diversity of Australia's cultural context.¹

The commitment to improving Aboriginal educational outcomes faces an uncertain future. In most respects, the gains have been small and their fragility is more than evident in light of recent events. The Prime Minister has refused to apologise for the past mistreatment of Aboriginal Australians, Governments are trying to erode and restrict native title claims, and racist political extremist groups, like the One Nation Party, have demonstrated growing popular support (gaining around 25% of the primary vote in the recent Queensland elections).

In this environment, educators have the task of equipping their students with the skills required for survival in the 21st century. There is no denying that Australia is part of a global economy and as such, we need the skills to interact in a culturally diverse market place. However, when coupled with the multi-cultural nature of Australian society, the need for educative strategies to deliver appropriate cross-cultural training becomes all too evident. There is little doubt that meeting these needs will require a self-reflective

¹ This is a shortened, altered version of a paper which was presented at The Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education, Auckland, July 1998, and subsequently published as part of the conference proceedings (see Slade and Morgan, 1998b). For a more detailed presentation of the views expressed in these papers, concerning the broader importance of Aboriginal philosophy in higher education, see Slade and Morgan, 1998a).

commitment to understand and resolve fundamental philosophical differences. That this task has been neglected to date is no more evident than in the persistent failure to produce equal educational outcomes for Aboriginal Australians (Westley, 1984; SSABSA, 1998). Despite our best efforts, and the continual presence of a moral responsibility to address this issue (Morgan and Allen, 1998), little appears to have been achieved. It is our contention that a major factor in this failure continues to be the inability to accommodate philosophical differences within the education process, and a reluctance to take the risk and to make the changes that this requires.

It is important, from the outset, to emphasise that Aboriginal Australians are an increasingly diverse people with differing and changing attitudes and beliefs. Despite the destructive impact of European occupation and cultural domination, there are few who do not remain profoundly motivated by the underlying assumptions of their Aboriginal philosophical heritage. Furthermore, despite their diversity, at the level of fundamental philosophical assumptions, it is correct to say that there is a pan-Australian Aboriginal worldview. Indeed, it is a worldview that:

- provides a coherent, systematic framework of thinking
- has a long history of development and successful application
- is currently used by Aboriginal students
- is excluded from mainstream education by the dominance of a European, restricted interpretation of mechanistic thinking
- is not plagued by internal inconsistencies
- for which full recognition and mainstream cultural inclusion is overdue.

Background

Philosophical differences are pronounced in the mainstream educative forum. In the classroom, European Australians euphemistically refer to their arrival and subsequent occupation of Australia using terms like 'discovery', 'proclamation', 'settlement', 'commonwealth' and 'nation'. In referring to the Australian way of life, they use terms like 'freedom', 'justice', 'prosperity', 'growth', and 'opportunity'. For Aboriginal Australians the

story is a different one. Aboriginal people(s)' accounts tell of invasion, brutality, betrayal, domination, and the subsequent neglect and exclusion of their people, their culture and their lands.

Little recognition is given to the intellectual, educational and spiritual life and ability of Aboriginal Australians prior to the invasion of their lands and the erosion of their culture. Aboriginal Australians were a nation of philosophers with a well-established, coherent set of beliefs and who systematically practised what is now considered the oldest continuous religion in the world (Bin-Salik, 1990: 7).

Aboriginal intellectual ability was recognised by Europeans within the first years of contact. When the first school for Aboriginal children, established by Governor Macquarie, one of its students — a girl with little more than three years formal European education — took out the major prize for academic achievement for the colony. From that day on, the racist assumption that Indigenous Australians were not cognitively capable of achieving intellectual parity with Europeans should have been dispelled (Bin-Salik, 1990: 7). Clearly, it was not.

The Aboriginal Australian 'Dark Age' began when the survivors of initial contact were 'protected' by Europeans on missions and reserves. In these environments, they were actively prevented from participating in their culture. An impoverished European 'education' replaced the rich intellectual life of Aboriginal Australians. However, the purpose of this was not to allow intellectual integration into Australian society — Aboriginal Australians were taught little more than basic literacy and numeracy skills (Bin-Salik, 1990: 4-5).

While policies of assimilation and integration did not deny Aboriginal Australians participation in Australian schools, the missions and reserves were geographically isolated, preventing equal participation and benefit from mainstream education. In 1972, with the election of the Whitlam Government, and a great deal of political action in the 1960s and 1970s by Aboriginal people and their supporters, the task of improving Aboriginal outcomes, especially in areas such as education and health, was declared a national priority. During

the 1970s tertiary support units were established and educational outcomes for Aboriginal Australians became a focus (Bin-Salik, 1990: 21).

Despite these changes, together with a growing awareness of their story and an increasing respect for its accuracy and importance within Australian history, not a great deal has changed for Aboriginal Australians. Even with the new, intentionally more sensitive, accountable policy directions towards self-determination, together with the more general commitment to equal opportunity and multi-culturalism over the last twenty years or so, the extent and pace of change has been neither sufficient nor reliable.

Accommodating Cultural Diversity

It is an undeniable reality for Aboriginal peoples that they remain the most disadvantaged, dominated and excluded group in Australian society, and that their culture is the most poorly understood and represented (DEET, 1995). However, it could well be the case that fundamental philosophical differences in the mainstream educational environment that involves cultural domination and exclusion will provide the explanatory key to lower attendance, retention and success rates. An increase in these rates is contingent upon Aboriginal Australian students learning to 'live between two worlds' (Christie, 1990) that are shaped and directed by inconsistent philosophical frameworks. Indeed, we will argue that successful outcomes are contingent upon two factors:

- Aboriginal students being able to resolve the inconsistencies between these two cultural worlds, and
- the preparedness of higher education to become culturally, and more particularly, philosophically, self-aware, self-critical and flexible, even to the point of developing a pluralistic environment (Slade and Morgan, 1998b).

Of course, the worst outcome for these students, as well as for education and the Australian community generally, would be an increase in these success and retention rates by way of students denying or detaching themselves from their Aboriginal culture and community.

Assessment within a European Cultural Context

The learning and assessment environments in Australia continue to be dominated by European culture and its ongoing, mainstream commitment to mechanistic, reductionistic thinking about what constitutes identity, knowledge, truth and value (Christie, 1990). Both the processes of learning and assessment and the knowledge that is imparted are predominantly European.

This raises two general problems. First, in an inflexible higher education environment, dominated by the European mechanistic framework, Aboriginal students get no formal credit for their years of training in their own knowledge systems. Even in languages, few educational institutions teach or give accreditation for fluency in local languages (Nathan, 1996: 9-12). Secondly, if learning and assessment within their own cultural framework is to continue along with their mainstream education, these students face either a greatly increased workload, or the stress of having to choose between the dominant culture and their own. To benefit from institutional education many Aboriginal students find that they must participate in processes of knowledge acquisition and assessment that differ profoundly (Slade and Morgan, 1998b, see Table 1) from the more holistic,



contextual processes they have learnt and continue to use within their own community, and with which they are more familiar (Morgan *et al.*, 1997; Slade and Morgan, 1998b). Hughes (1988) employs a useful analogy involving circles and squares to characterise broadly these fundamentally different processes. Aboriginal Australians, he says, 'think in circles with no specific reference points', whereas the method used in education thinks 'in squares with clear reference points as you move along a straight line to one reference point, and then another line to another reference point, and so on'

(Hughes, 1988: 7). Lewis O'Brien, a Kurna Elder, refers to this learning process as one that begins with the whole and goes 'little bit, little bit'; starting with the full reality of the Dreaming, involving its many inseparable aspects, such as identity, spirituality, knowledge, truth and value, and focusing through this interconnectedness onto the 'little bits'. None of these 'bits' are thought to be separable, either practically or analytically, in the European sense (Morgan, 1998; Slade and Morgan, 1998b).

Table 1: Philosophical differences in learning*

Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Contextual – interdependent	Fragmented – mechanistic
Concrete – related to experiences	Abstract – theoretical
Individuals chosen for learning	Individuals choose learning direction
Motivated by obligation, responsibility and spiritual commitment	Motivated by competition, acquisition and personal ambition
Truth is broadly subjective and relative	Truth is objective, factual and absolute
Knowledge owned and exchanged on the basis of rights and responsibilities	Knowledge is publicly available and exchanged as a commodity

* Note: We emphasise that these are broad, abstract generalisations of Aboriginal thinking

Dealing with these two problems is contingent upon creating a learning and assessment environment that is culturally more flexible, that formally includes Indigenous knowledge and learning styles, and that sets out to resolve the inconsistencies between the two. These are particularly important tasks in terms of Aboriginal Australians achieving successful primary and secondary educative outcomes and making the transition to higher education (Bourke *et al.*, 1996).

Giving Comparable Status to Aboriginal Culture in Teacher Education

Given both the needs of Aboriginal students, and the knowledge, experience and prior claim of Aboriginal peoples to the land, Aboriginal cultures are clearly not given the status that they deserve in education research and teaching programs. When it does appear, e.g. in language, arts and anthropology, it is fragmented and dealt with as a

collection of reified cultural objects, separated from their cultural context and their legitimate owners. Teaching and research of Aboriginal culture in Australia is still largely the province of non-Aboriginal academics (Bourke *et al.*, 1991).

There is a relative absence of Aboriginal cultures in higher education. This demonstrates both neglect and the acceptance of a mistaken view that Aboriginal culture does not contain a coherent set of beliefs and practices that are systematic, subject to review and informed by a philosophical framework (Swain, 1993; Lawlor, 1991). Implicit in its absence is the assumption that, outside defined areas, Aboriginal culture has little to offer.

In terms of its role in the education of teachers, this kind of neglect has compounding consequences. The relative absence of Aboriginal culture from the higher education environment narrows the cultural options and educational experience of student teachers, denying them the benefits of a truly multi-cultural education.

More threateningly, this is an instance of a more general neglect of the purpose and responsibility of higher education for the maintenance of cultural integrity. In a multi-cultural country like Australia, with an increasingly diverse global involvement, this amounts to a neglect of our cross-cultural integrity. Indeed, we are continually confronted by the destructive consequences of two forms of cultural paradox, both of which are demanding pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual adjustments that we seem unable to make and about which our institutions of higher education are doing very little. Given the cultural influence of higher education, particularly through its control of education research and teacher training, cultural neglect at this level becomes both cause and effect of educational neglect in general, and of the cultural paradox that it fails to address.

Dealing with Cultural Paradox

Cultural paradox occurs when a society, or a group within a society, develops and maintains a commitment to inconsistent cultural assumptions.

This might happen in two ways (Slade, 1998c):

- From within a culture when cultural change, or change which is inspired and informed by that culture, is not readily adopted. At its most extreme, a culture may discover its own negation, producing a three-fold internal crisis — a pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual crisis.
- Cultural paradox might also develop when two inconsistent cultures merge. Participating in higher education involves Aboriginal students in both forms of cultural paradox.

The second form of cultural paradox is created by unresolved fundamental philosophical inconsistencies between Aboriginal and European cultures. Despite its dynamic and diverse nature, Aboriginal thinking is consistently holistic and contextual (Slade and Morgan, 1998b, Table 2). Identity, place, time, knowledge, spirituality, learning and assessment are inseparable aspects of each other. By contrast, European culture remains committed to a reductionistic, mechanistic worldview in which reality is divisible and knowable in terms of discrete things (Morgan *et al.*, 1997).

Table 2: Differences in worldview

Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Holistic, contextual and spiritual	Mechanistic, reductionist and empiricist
Reality is interconnected – complete	Reality is discrete – separate parts of a whole
Time is contextual – the confluence of people and events	Time is linear and has ontological status
Personal identity is a plural extension of spirit/land	Personal identity is individualistic, separate from the land and spirit
The spiritual is integral to the physical	The spiritual is separate from the physical, one cannot be the other.

Note: Once again, we emphasise that these are broad abstract generalisations about Aboriginal Australian thinking.

Despite the need to participate in a European cultural context, most Aboriginal students retain a commitment to their Indigenous perspective. Although contradictoriness does not pose difficulties whilst students are using Indigenous thinking (Swain, 1993), when they employ the European perspective it involves necessary mutual exclusion; both views cannot be correct. This generates an ever-present need to either resolve

the differences or to choose between cultures — a task which is only made more difficult by the competitive demands of education.

As mentioned earlier, Aboriginal students need to participate in learning and assessment processes within both cultural contexts. Cultural paradox may result in a compounding of the stresses created by this additional workload.

The first form of cultural paradox is inherited by Aboriginal students by way of their participation in European culture. Through the consistent application of mechanistic thinking European culture has discovered its own negation; the reality of interconnectedness, relativity and chaos in several fields (Capra, 1987; Spradlin and Porterfield, 1984). For much of the twentieth century the difficulty has been in learning to think in these terms without, in turn, denying the place and importance of mechanistic logic. Achieving this outcome has the potential not only to remove a fundamental source of stress and restraint for those working with or within European culture, but also to create the basis for a mutually inclusive multi-culturalism.

Broader Implications — Thinking Globally and Acting Locally

Although the focus of this paper has been on the needs of Aboriginal Australian students in education, it is clear that the problems they face, in dealing with both forms of cultural paradox, are shared by people of cultures whose fundamental philosophical beliefs are similarly holistic and contextual. Indeed, through the globalisation of European culture, the task of dealing with the contemporary expression of both forms of cultural paradox, becomes the global task of achieving global interdependence and cultural pluralism (Slade, 1998c; Teasdale and Teasdale, 1998). Ultimately, this amounts to acting locally to meet the global challenge of learning to think in terms of interconnectedness and relativity.

It is our claim that the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students are largely the consequence of a broader process of cultural domination and exclusion. The successful participation of Aboriginal Australians in education, and ultimately in Australian society, is contingent upon developing a truly multi-cultural context that provides for the mutual inclusion of all participating cultures. In turn, this is contingent upon achieving and maintaining mutually inclusive philosophical assumptions about the fundamental interconnected nature of time, space, identity, spirituality, knowledge, truth and value. More broadly, in the context of the global challenge to apply interdependence and cultural pluralism in and through education (Delors, 1998), achieving mutual

inclusion at this fundamental paradigmatic level is a necessary condition of human survival and the preservation of cultural diversity (Slade, 1998a, b).

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