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ABSTRACT

Two types of programs are currently targeted specifically toward adult Aboriginal people in Australia: (1) compensatory programs that are designed to compensate for lapses and defects in the education they have received in the regular educational system; and (2) support programs based on provision of academic support, personal support, and an environment supportive of a positive sense of Aboriginal identity. Because of the unique history of their development and the special problems they have encountered as members of a minority group, Aboriginal people have a unique set of basic education political education and community development needs. The most effective way of meeting these diverse needs would be through integrated development of academic and personal/political skills programs for Aboriginal adults in order to give adequate consideration to the historical and political factors influencing their educational needs in the 1990s. At present, however, the links between personal/political development and academic skills in many programs targeted toward Aboriginal people are being marginalized in a political and economic climate that encourages funding of educational programs based on the outcomes of learning rather than on the value of the learning process itself. (Contains 27 references.) (MN)

Issues in Aboriginal adult education: Balancing academic skills and personal/political development.

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Introduction

This paper explores the links between academic development and personal/political development in Aboriginal adult basic education. It proposes that there should be integrated development of academic and personal/political skills in programs for Aboriginal adults in order to take account of the historical and political factors influencing educational needs in the 1990s. Currently, however the links between personal/political development and academic skills, are being marginalised in a political and economic climate which encourages funding of educational programs on the basis of products of the learning journey. This ignores the value of the journey itself and the achievements recorded along the way.

Within this climate educators are being coerced to adopt narrow conceptual definitions of learning to fit with economically driven policy and planning strategies. This is apparent in the way literacy, as one indicator of academic prowess, has been refined to the stage where many definitions portray it as a purely skills based concept. I would argue that literacy is much more than this and to define it as such lures policy makers and educators into the trap of conceiving uni-dimensional skills based behavioural programs to 'eradicate' literacy.

No doubt workers in other adult basic education programs will identify with this situation because the links between personal/political and academic growth are not exclusive to Aboriginal adult students. I would suggest though, that the historical and social location of Aboriginal people in contemporary Australian society highlights the particular need for an examination of the influences on Aboriginal adult students returning to study. These influences will impact on Aboriginal students at an individual and institutional level and will affect what institutions offer to Aboriginal adults in addition to the ways in which Aboriginal adults decide to participate in education systems.

Scope of this paper

For those unfamiliar with the diversity of cultural, political and educational needs of Aboriginal people some background is necessary. In 1974 the Australian Government advocated the use of the following definition when referring to Aboriginal people. An Aborigine is

> **a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives."**
> (Hollinsworth and Kijas:1988:25)

I will be using this as my reference point for Aboriginality. In setting the context for this paper I will first examine the literature on Aboriginal adult basic education programs for those whose main language is English. I will look at the socio-cultural, and educational profiles of students who are most likely to attend these courses. I will also offer my own observations from experience gained in classroom settings with Aboriginal adults.

These research and experiential observations provide the foundation for examining three key concepts in the Aboriginal adult basic education field; 'literacy', culture and the development of identity. I intend to use these theoretical concepts to examine some trends in policy development and the implications for program practice.

The final part of this paper will review the need for further research and ways in which this might be achieved.

Programs for Aboriginal adults

Within the literature various terms are used to describe programs available to Aboriginal adults. I use the terms 'compensatory education' and 'support programs' to refer to programs provided for Aboriginal people who nave made a decision to return to formal or non-formal courses of study.

Compensatory programs

Compensatory programs for Aboriginal people are by no means meant to compensate for intrinsic deficiencies in the person, rather they are compensation for "the lapses and defects ... a supportive school system should have attained." (Lane:1988:2) The only danger here is in assuming that this school system supports all *non*-Aboriginal children to achieve an independent level of literacy, numeracy and communication skills. As recent research has shown many members of the Australian population have difficulty with literacy tasks. (Grant:1987, Nelson & Dymock:1981) This paper is concerned though with the particular needs of Aboriginal people.

Another difficulty compensatory programs face is the magnitude of the task in terms of the range of skills and areas of knowledge to be consolidated. Some programs are expected to provide the equivalent of many years of missed or inappropriate learning to reach a benchmark of acceptability for employment or further study. With changing economic times this benchmark also changes. Statistics still place Aboriginal adults in the low secondary years as school leavers, yet potential employers seek matriculation as the basis for many jobs which previously would have required any of the upper secondary years as an entry requirement.

Support programs

Support programs for Aboriginal students have been described by Jordan as

> **Aboriginal students enrolled in standard courses within institutions...given additional support appropriate to their culture, lifestyles and educational background. (1985:6)**

The essential elements of these programs include:

* academic support
* personal support
* an environment supportive of a positive sense of Aboriginal identity.

Generally support programs exist within the administrative structure of tertiary or higher education institutions. Compensatory programs are more often associated with post-secondary educational requirements and have much in common with the level of academic skills taught in general adult basic education programs in the wider community.

Learner backgrounds

Students attending support and compensatory programs have diverse experiences, backgrounds and abilities, and within this group there exists a number of sub-groups with specific personal/political and educational needs. A review of the literature (Ingram, (no date) Gaskell, 1980) and recollections based on my experiences as a staff member at the Aboriginal Community College in South Australia, highlight the following recurring themes when Aboriginal adult students seek to re-enter education programs:

* experience of racism on a regular basis in the wider community
* sense of an external locus of control
* feeling of existing outside mainstream society
* problems with police directly or through extended family relations

* fairly defined and initially conservative views of adult education
* recurring negative memories of school experiences reinforced by more recent experiences through their children's schooling
* intermittent schooling as a child
* generally low school leaver age around the junior secondary level
* sense of inadequacy relating to academic prowess
* past or current drug and alcohol problems
* poor health
* sequential or long term unemployment
* precarious economic stability and generally receiving some form of government benefit

Literacy and numeracy skills are often underdeveloped because of limited schooling and few opportunities for consolidation after leaving school. Many students say they do not feel comfortable talking in large groups, even with other Aboriginal people. Their knowledge of current events relating to the wider community is often limited and in exercises which ask them to rate their interpersonal skills they generally opt for low ratings. Requests for courses are encapsulated in the desire to 'learn maths and English' or 'I want to help my people'. (Holt:1985:3) Underlying many of these requests is a more general but often less articulated need to feel better about themselves - to be more in control of their lives.

Given that many of these examples depict a fairly negative picture of Aboriginal adults returning to study it is important not to present them as victims or 'emotional cripples'. Writers such as Langton (1981) and Holt (1985) have emphasised the positive aspects of Aboriginal society and they are critical of the emphasis many non-Aboriginal writers seem to place on negative issues. I am conscious of this in my own writing; the purpose of this profile is to show the range of factors impinging on Aboriginal adult students returning to study and the way in which demands are constantly made of them from areas other than the academic field. These demands can't be ignored when developing programs for Aboriginal adults.

Furthermore the above profile relates to Aboriginal adult students in the adult basic education area. There may be some parallels with other fields of education, however in the 1990s Aboriginal people are successfully participating in employment and educational arenas where they are not subject to the same economic or academic pressures. So these profiles are by no means representative of Aboriginal adults as a whole.

In recent years I have observed that there has been a comparative increase in the range of personal, social and academic skills Aboriginal adult students display. I will return to the relevance of this point later in the discussion, as I believe it has implications for the kinds of students attracted to 'compensatory' and 'support' programs.

The social construction of identity

What learners in these programs have in common is their Aboriginality, however this is not always easily definable or, accepted positively in many work or learning settings. Understanding identity construction is crucial to understanding the responses Aboriginal people make to offerings of mainstream education. Many Aboriginal people are exploring the links between their past and their sense of belonging in the contemporary Australian context. This is being done via plays, songs, dance and other written forms including articles with an academic focus, and often in a context where identity construction has been associated with non Aboriginal writings about perceives Aboriginal identity.

Langton (1981:16) examines the tendency of anthropologists and social scientists to categorise Aboriginal people on the basis of cultural groups, blood type or locational factors. She argues,

> **...that urban Aboriginal culture cannot be explained solely by emphasising either socio-economic circumstances or differing cultural origins" (1981:17).**

Different Aboriginal communities have constructed their own reality and this has occurred through a process of adaptation within the context of historical processes. Much of the research on urban Aboriginal identity and culture has failed to take account of the way in which 'urbanising Aboriginal people' have perceived their own conditions and the active role they have played in responding to these same conditions. Langton rejects theories which portray Aborigines as victims of 'culture of poverty' or institutional constraints alone.

Jordan (1984,1985, 1986) has examined the construction of Aboriginal identity from a sociological perspective. Citing work by Berger and Luckmann she offers a definition of identity

> **... as location of the self in a particular world of meaning, both by the self and others. It is a product of interactions between individuals and social structures, and individuals and others. (1984:275)**

When individuals locate themselves within a particular group they theorise about the nature of that group and in doing so "present as a coherent whole" the nature of the group for examination and analysis by others. This theorising may take different forms and Jordan identifies three levels on the basis of the work presented by Berger and Luckmann.

At one level the conversation of every day life contains within it incipient theorising:

> **...language acts to legitimate and perpetuate meanings through this form of theorising (Jordan:1986:10)**

and we may be unaware of how this is operating even at the same time as we are using this language.

Second, rudimentary theorising offers explanations of the reality around us. Schutz (in Jordan,1986:10) describes this as 'recipe knowledge, everyday accounts of how the world works.'

Third, explicit theories involve more complicated theorising about the nature of the universe.

> **For individuals, ... forming a coherent identity is dependent on their ability to objectivate such a symbolic universe by theorising, and then locate themselves within this world of meaning in a manner that is plausible to them and others. (1986:10)**

Jordan's work presents a number of important findings, but for the purposes of this paper I think two are worth emphasising. The first is in close agreement with my own observations in Aboriginal communities.

> **Aborigines are not a monolithic group ... There is not one world of meaning for Aborigines. ... different Aboriginal groups conceptualise Aboriginal identity differently." (1984:289)**

This has important implications for policy and educational practice.

Secondly, highly visible groups of Aborigines, in conjunction with policies which favour an Aboriginal world view and support the development of Aborigines as a separate group, engender less support by non-Aboriginal students in the school situations examined by Jordan. Non-Aboriginal students who have daily contact with Aboriginal people hold negative stereotypes however the Aboriginal students in Jordan's work still perceive themselves in positive ways. Jordan suggests this is because they are responding to the positive aspects of 'reality definers', those people who build positive theories about Aborigines in the school and wider community. As a consequence it would seem that Aboriginal controlled organisations serve a useful purpose for students, offering a vehicle whereby they can identify with others in their group and be supported by non-Aboriginal people who hold positive views about Aborigines. It is inevitable that these Aboriginal controlled institutions will also engender negative views in the wider population as a result of their catering to a specific target group.

Education and Aboriginality

In particular Aboriginal identity formation is to a large extent influenced by recent events in Australian society. Since the introduction of the Whitlam government in 1972 and the recognition of the need for more Aboriginal involvement in decision making and implementation of programs for Aboriginal people, many positions in government departments have been Aboriginalised. But Aboriginality works for and against these employees. Field officers, for example are required to have a sound working knowledge of community and consultative processes within their own community. However, the administrative and communication skills required to complement these practical skills within a bureaucratic framework are often underdeveloped. In times of organisational conflict, their Aboriginality, part of the very reason for their employment in the first place, is undermined. Limited administrative expertise and inexperience in articulating the community situation in large gatherings with non-Aboriginal people, is equated, often incorrectly and unfairly, with their consultancy and community relations skills. In many cases employment on the basis of Aboriginality is contested by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues, however covertly, and provides a subtle means by which their professionalism can be undermined.

An interesting example of this situation and the successful fight for employee awards to recognise Aboriginality as a qualification is presented by David Kelly (1988) in his description of the 'historic fight' by Liaison Officers in the Aboriginal Education Unit, NSW Department of TAFE. These officers took their claim to an industrial tribunal to have Aboriginality formally recognised both financially and in terms of promotion within the structure of their award.

Education for Aboriginal people moving into such areas of employment needs to include analysis of social structures and practise in the communication skills that enable them to have a greater say in how things will be done. Incidentally, I believe many of these issues will continue to cause conflict even when Aboriginalisation has become more of a reality. Aboriginal people themselves do embrace different ideologies and perspectives on how things should be done and why.

Various other examples are available to show the way in which Aboriginal people are controlled through individual and institutional practices. Jordan (1985: 28) cites the range of definitions put forward by government departments to name and control the Aboriginal population. In addition historical and social situations have shaped the way in which Aboriginal people are perceived by members of contemporary Australian society and in turn the way they see themselves.

In 1965 in South Australia the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

> **could declare an Aboriginal to be a 'trainee' ... It was, in fact, an offence for an Aboriginal to thereafter leave an institution until his training was completed." (Lane:1984:44)**

Essentially this meant that as recently as 1965 the 'trainee' was subject to restrictions similar to those in force during the so-called 'Protection' era of Australian colonial history.

In Port Augusta, in South Australia, the first Aboriginal family to be housed in the city was admitted as late as 1968 (Gaskell:1980:7). In terms of daily contact with Aborigines the Port Augusta community had limited experiences of Aborigines as neighbours and 'settled' citizens.

Furthermore it was not until 1967 that Aboriginal people were 'counted in reckoning the population' (Hollinsworth:1988) and constitutional restrictions were removed to incorporate them under Federal laws.

From the above examples it is possible to see that many older students in Aboriginal adult education programs will have experienced conditions which do not positively affirm their presence. As a consequence they form very clear ideas about how the wider society views their capabilities. As part of their ongoing political and personal development more Aboriginal people are demanding to maintain and control their own processes of identity formation but for some, the negative influences of non-Aboriginal society have been so strong, that they have been "forced to choose between being 'Academic' or being 'Aboriginal' (Holt:1985:4). The two are often seen as mutually exclusive by both blacks and whites and this limits the opportunities Aborigines may see as being available to them.

Identity as a personal and social construct is shaped by these historical, and political influences which continue to have an impact. Both social processes and family pressures determine the range of options Aboriginal people perceive to be available to them, and this has influenced how Aboriginal people articulate their educational needs.

Educational needs

The variety of demands placed on Aboriginal people, both socially and vocationally results in a number of corresponding educational needs (Gaskell (1980), Fesl (1982), Jordan (1985) and Foley (1987)). The following table by Foley (1987:24) summarises these findings.

ADULT EDUCATION 'NEEDS' OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Basic education
* literacy
* numeracy
* study skills
* health education
* educational and employment opportunities
* individual and family budgeting

Political education
* decision making skills
* negotiating skills
* lobbying skills
* assertiveness training
* meeting procedures
* anti-racist education
* Aboriginal heritage sites, oral history, language
* contemporary political economy: local, national, global
* developing political movements/activist skills

Community development
* working with the NSW Land Rights Act
* obtaining and using capital
* enterprise development
* small business management
* administration:
  bookkeeping, budgeting, organising work
  typing, word-processing, computing, filing

Aboriginal people do see literacy as a part of the total educational process - a fact not too much at variance with many other community development and basic education programs.

However the previously described socio-cultural profiles and educational needs provide a background against which to examine approaches to education, and more specifically approaches to literacy, which will encourage more relevant educational provision for Aboriginal adults.

Useful theoretical background

In this section of the paper I want to briefly, even superficially explore some perspectives on the theoretical perspectives of literacy, and culture and the implications for Aboriginal adult education programs. I have been influenced in this area by a view of education as emancipatory, and central to self-determination. The question remains what kind of education do Aboriginal people see as most relevant to their self-determination.

A sociological perspective of literacy

For the purposes of this paper I intend to focus on a theory of literacy congruent with ideologies of culture and education from the critical social science field. This assumes that content and context are central to understanding and developing literacy practices. Literacy is set alongside all the other experiences and skills students seek to acquire and must take account of the social and political context of learners lives. Students are encouraged to negotiate the knowledge they perceive to be important, while recognising the demands made by powerful forces which have a degree of control over their vocational and educational opportunities.

In using this approach to literacy learning I seek to avoid Meek's concern about basic skills teaching marginalising the lived experiences of many learners. Traditionally Meek proposes that 'basic skills' are taught as part of the repertoire of skills the student must have to enter someone else's world. My own view of literacy suggests basic skills must be reconceptualised to foreground those skills which learners see as crucial to the way they want to live their lives, and what is important to them in their worlds.

An examination of the historical development of a definition of literacy shows that it is only recently that 'functional literacy' became synonymous with work-based literacy needs. Gray's initial definition (Levine:1987:28) described a person as

> **functionally literate when he [sic] has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group."**

Although this ignored the context of oral cultures, it did focus on culture as the prime indicator of literacy needs and provided a framework for literacy which was determined by community needs.

Levine notes the change from medieval times when there was an emphasis on the highest levels of literacy, to our current preoccupation with the lowest level of skills which will allow inclusion in the definition.

In a more recent discourse on literacy, Giroux in "Literacy: Reading the Word and the World" (Freire and Macedo:1988:10-12) defines literacy over three pages. He sees it as

> **...discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relations and experiences that exist between learners and the world. ... To be literate is *not* to be free. ... literacy provides an essential precondition for organising and understanding the socially constructed nature of subjectivity and experience and for assessing how knowledge, power, and social practice can be collectively forged in the service of making decisions instrumental to a democratic society rather than merely consenting to the wishes of the rich and the powerful.**

Consideration needs to be given to a concept of literacy as presented by Meek, Freire, Macedo, Giroux and others that is an on-going and dynamic process influenced by the life situations learners bring to the class. Such a concept of literacy will recognise the central position of power relations within literacy practices and the deeply embedded racism and sexism which operates against learners as they seek to use their literacy skills.

Culture and literacy

A view of literacy which positions power and context at the centre of literacy practices will also acknowledge the impact of cultures on literacy practices. Culture has often been described in terms of cultural artefacts; the dances and songs of a group. Sutton (1981) distinguishes between cultural artefacts and principles; that is the guidelines for living as embraced by a group.

If we perceive literacy to be a function of language and our language as a means of defining our reality then, as a consequence of this, culture and the way we perceive culture will shape our perception of the literacy process and its purposes.

In a discussion specifically related to literacy Macedo (Freire & Macedo:1987:51) puts forward the following view:

> **Culture is not an autonomous system, but a system characterised by social stratification and tensions. ... Richard Johnson's definition of culture ... includes the following three main premises:**
>
> **1. Cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations, especially class relations and class formations, with sexual divisions, with the racial structuring of social relations and with age oppressions as a form of dependency.**
>
> **2. Culture involves power and helps to produce assymetries in the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and realise their needs.**
>
> **3. Culture is neither autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles."**

The above quote proposes a more political and dynamic view of culture as ideas, beliefs and values which are shaped not only by geographic location, but also by class, gender and ethnic/indigenous relations in society.

To this extent then culture directly influences the way literacy is perceived, taught and learnt. To consider extremes, literacy can be used to maintain the status quo and teach skills and behaviours which will perpetuate existing employment and educational opportunities for Aboriginal people and obscure the role of racism and sexism in defining these opportunities. On the other hand literacy can be embraced as a process which explores the conflict and differences existing as part of the education and employment systems. It can be used to understand, challenge and possibly reshape the inequalities within these systems.

Implications for Aboriginal adult education programs and current practice

The preceding discussion has looked at a number of factors which influence Aboriginal adult basic education programs and discussed briefly the nature of the student group and their needs.

As outlined by Foley et al (1987:8) the Australian government is currently concerned about its competitive standing in the international arena. To this extent "Aborigines are peripheral and expendable" and it is unlikely that there will be any change in this attitude given the directions being taken as a result of economic and political pressures in the educational arena.

As a consequence emphasis is placed on funding for programs which have identifiable outcomes related to jobs or further education. Time constraints are put on courses. Subject development is encouraged in specific areas and entrance requirements are geared to promote successful graduation from courses within an allocated period. Even where entrance requirements are minimal there seems to be a distinct tendency for the client group profile to show increasing prior educational achievement. This raises issues about the way Aboriginal people perceive these programs and their accessibility for low educational achievers. Providers may need to revisit the motives of 'compensatory' programs and ask whether programs are indeed accessible to those who need them.

Further issues include the appropriateness of literacy and general education methodologies for Aboriginal adult students and the usefulness of materials or methodologies from other settings. There is a conspicuous lack of adult education materials which I consider accurately depicts the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people and in some cases it blatantly denies the reality of Australian Aboriginal history this perpervating false notions of 'passive settlement.

It seems to me there is an obvious need for stronger links between those who administer and fund Aboriginal adult education programs - the policy makers, and those who work in the classroom - practitioners. This may alleviate some of the problems inherent in creating program structures in an administrative climate which is removed from the complexities of provision. In addition the current practice of funding vocationally oriented programs denies the fact that today's society is changing at such a rapid rate that many of the skills Aboriginal people are taught, focuses their employment opportunities in the shrinking sector of a radically changing employment market. It also raises questions about the validity of the social-vocation distinction in skills development.

At a more pragmatic level time constraints are also an issue. As Ingram (no date:65) notes from direct experience with Aboriginal adults engaged in the learning process:

> **a significant change can be produced in two or three months ...but a constant and consistently supportative climate and supportative counselling is essential for much more than twelve months for most people, and more than two years for many, if the change is to be stabilised ... This is not an easy fact to be accepted by funding agencies.**

He is making particular reference to the processes of personal, social and political development which Aboriginal people undergo on returning to study. Are policy makers cognisant of these issues in developing time lines for the funding of programs? And if they are why do program guidelines seem to ignore the message?

Where to from here?

The purpose of this paper was to explore some of the links between personal/political and academic development in Aboriginal adult basic education programs and examine directions for future research. One obvious step would be to develop a course to meet the needs already stated by a number of Aboriginal community groups and students, and in efficient administrative fashion develop a national curriculum to capitalise on resources, research, expenditure and development. Of course curriculum structure would need to be flexible to accommodate communities, and it is at this stage that some attention must be given to the consultative processes embedded in curriculum development.

Consultative processes with Aboriginal groups have been noticeable for inconsistencies between rhetoric and reality. They rarely allow for the necessary time to seed an idea and await the resultant development and refinement by community groups. They almost always assume the existence of a consensus view within and between Aboriginal community groups. In addition the questions posed as part of the consultative process generate answers which are often not consistent with existing education provision frameworks which will inevitably provide the support for any new programs.

I would suggest that we are still in the early stages of responding to the personal and political needs of Aboriginal adult students and, as a result of funding pressures and educational restructuring, may have fallen behind previously progressive measures initiated by places such as the Aboriginal Community College in South Australia, or the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs. Any future research on appropriate and useful basic education programs for Aboriginal adults must take account of the increasing control and accountability required of funding sources. However unless adequate consultative procedures are used and unless they account for the political and historical context of learners lives, the information gained will have questionable validity and its usefulness as a basis for developing future programs to respond to community needs will be limited. Future research needs to address the issues of consultative processes with Aboriginal groups - particularly in the context of the English speaking, settled regions of Australian society, if programs are to offer any real alternatives to existing mainstream promision.

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