

An experiment in method

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A one week's school for training in the work of Co-operatives for Aborigines was held at 'Tranby' by the Australian Board of Missions in February this year, organized by the Rev. Alfred Clint. It was the third successive year in which such a school was held. As in former years it consisted of two courses for two groups—one for aborigines, the other for European teachers, administrators and missionaries working in aboriginal settlements. The main part of the course dealt with the principles and practices of native Co-ops and experiences with them in the Pacific, Australia and elsewhere. I had been asked to give one lecture to the European group in 1960, on 'modern techniques in adult education', and feeling this was quite inappropriate, had applied the method described below to an aspect of their work. This had resulted in my being asked to take three sessions and try the same method with the aborigine group at this school, as well as one session with the Europeans. Only the former is reported here.

This article consists of a report on these sessions, together with some reflections and questions on the relevance of this method to other aspects of our work, in particular to that of the ordinary lecture-discussion session. The method used in the sessions reported on is not new. Americans have been using it for years. Its application in this instance (and in two or three other instances by the writer) arose from experience in a 'tutors' workshop' in 1959–60, and subsequent experiments by other tutors in two short courses and with some groups.

The particular 'experiment' in method described above may not, in itself, have much intrinsic or extrinsic value. But it raises, once again, questions in my mind about our dependence on the lecture-discussion method in adult education. Do we too uncritically assume that this is the most effective method of teaching adults?

It may be that a critical appraisal of the method used in this instance will lead to the conclusion that even with this group, the lecture-discussion would have been a better method to have used. Certainly, if there were any advantages in the method used, it must be established what these were and whether they were as educationally valuable as those which would have been secured from a lecture followed by discussion.

Even if it were concluded that this method was perhaps more suitable than the lecture for such a 'problem-solving' situation, can it have any useful application where the teaching objective is different? Again, would it be usefully applicable to more sophisticated groups at more advanced levels of study? Is it a pre-requisite for its application that the audience must be reasonably homogeneous in levels of experience, background and education? Has this method any useful applications to some teaching, some of the time, in 'subject' fields of ordinary classes? Personally, I do not think the lecture can be dispensed with entirely in any course—but maybe its value could be enhanced by more discriminating use of it and other methods.

Would it be worthwhile for a group of tutors to study how this method might be applied in a subject field?

It is obviously a method that is much 'slower', will 'cover' less ground, than the usual lecture-discussion, because the pace at which a subject is covered in the latter is largely determined (and usually pre-determined) by the tutor, hardly at all by the students; and we all know a lot more than our students, and—possibly—assume that having uttered it is *known* to them, also, and we sweep on to the next lecture. Is it better for being slower?

This method tends to rate higher than is usual in the tutorial class situation, the motives, interests and 'objectives' of the students—do we normally make too many uncritical assumptions about these; or ignore them?

This method may also involve more thought about the educational objectives of a class session (or a course) and the method of presentation, than perhaps is normally given to these; it does not necessarily involve any less thought by the tutor about the subject or the content of the lecture or course. Do we normally think closely enough about the 'objectives' of our teaching in relation to content and methods of presenting materials?

The method used in the Co-Op. Schools raises also the question of how far we, or we and the students, usually attempt to appraise what is being done in a class or course, apart from reading and written work. Within the narrow limits set in the Tranby sessions of 1960 and 1961, the tutor was in a position to make some 'appraisal' of what students had contributed in relation to what he would have told them had he lectured on the subject instead, because all the main heads of his 'subject' arrived on the blackboard by dint of questioning; and in asking students to explain or to discuss what they thought was involved in this or that, and supplementing what they offered by direct explanations of his own, or by further

questions, the content under ‘headings’ was orally filled out, relations between parts of the whole traversed, and some attention drawn to principles involved. But does the fact that the main content of what otherwise would have been given in a lecture, was finally elucidated in this way, establish that what it was sought to teach had been taught, or learnt, as thoroughly, or that as much had been learned, as would have been learnt from a lecture-discussion? The only *certainty* I have is that it was much harder work for the tutor than lecturing—and this may be accounted a defect; and that it obviously tried the students harder than being lectured to or at. Sleep was impossible, inattention difficult and dangerous—the tutor might pounce with a question.

But did it ‘try’ the students in any ‘educative’ way? Professor Gibb fears that this method results only in students airing, and having aired being confirmed in, their own prejudices and ignorance. Was this all that happened, in fact, in this instance? And has distinction to be made between what (it is assumed) was learnt by those who contributed and those who were silent? May it have been that the latter, or both, would have learnt more from a straight lecture? How effective a test of what has been learnt from the lecture is the subsequent discussion? Is it, or can it be made, of any value as a test of learning?

Composition of the group

The group consisted of 15–16 aborigines from northern N.S.W., already working in a co-op.; four or five from Condobolin-Lake Cargelligo area where they have no co-op. at present; eight to ten from the Townsville and Palm Island region, in the first of which is a co-op.; one from South Australia; several from Torres Strait; one, I think, from one of the Pacific islands; and one or two from Brisbane, including the only woman in the group, a Mrs. _____.

Some of these were half- or quarter-caste (about six or eight); one (aged 15) was half American negro, half aborigine. Some were from Native reserves; some were or had become free citizens and were urbanized. A small number were skilled tradesmen (plumbers and drainlayers; carpenters; a butcher; mechanics and fitters) and some others were part qualified as tradesmen. Ages ranged from 15 to 65; the median about 40. The levels of education varied. One young half-caste from Palm Island was a certificated (Queensland) teacher who had been through Teachers' College; Mrs. _____ had had secondary education and was a trained concert singer; the qualified tradesmen had done their technical college courses while serving apprenticeship, while others had served full apprenticeship without completing a technical college course; others (trained on a Native Settlement or Reserve) had a thorough trades training, with very little schooling at all; all had had some primary education, but ability to read in English seemed to vary very widely; with a few it appeared to be little more than ability to read English words aloud without being able to interpret what was read. (This may have been shyness?)

Their interest, in my own and those other sessions at which I was present, varied considerably, and since we met in a marquee with raised sides, egress was easy if attention flagged or was diverted. There was constant interruption from outside the tent. Attention varied considerably—the better educated had their attention readily 'engaged' and kept; but those, like the Torres Islanders, who clearly found the subjects, content and vocabulary of the (European) speakers difficult, were often clearly not really 'with us'.

What was attempted

(i) My first session with the group was early in their course. I was apprehensive I might fail to secure any response. At the outset I made it clear that I knew nothing about co-operatives among their peoples and knew nothing about their problems as aborigines. What

I was concerned to do in this session was to help *them* to discuss some aspects of their problems in *forming* a co-operative, and to see what they thought were the best ways of taking the *first* steps. I was too ignorant to tell them; they must tell me. We would assume that they had decided to form a co-op.: What did they think were the first things to be done in order to put their decision into action? Would someone suggest one thing that they thought had to be done? I asked for and secured a 'chalker' to write on the blackboard the suggestions that they would make. By my watch we sat in silence for 1½ minutes before they cracked. I got one strangled word 'meeting'. We were off. By dint of questioning, and as little suggestion as possible, we had by 4.45pm, nearly three hours later (less a tea break), worked back through 'meeting' to 'seeking members' to 'seeking facts about their people and conditions' to the setting up of an informal 'organizing committee' and thence to the main tasks and problems of an organizing committee *before* it set out to make its first contacts with members to put the idea before them of coming to a meeting to be called to hear about co-operatives. By this time we had 1½ sides of the blackboard filled—by them—with the headings and sub-sections of the steps involved, and had canvassed in broad terms, what kinds of tasks were involved in their 'fact finding', 'methods of communication', what 'resources' they would need to communicate, what kinds of 'obstacles' they might anticipate, and what they might do to prepare in advance to meet them. Out of 25–27 continuously present, only 12 had spoken: two of these, Mrs. _____ and the 15-year-old Negro-Aborigine, had had to be checked early because they were making too many suggestions (all to the point). If I'd let them, the rest would have been content to let those two act as spokesmen.

In winding up I explained that the purpose of this workshop had been to show them a way of thinking and planning for action in any venture they chose to undertake—not just in terms of co-ops. Did they see this? There was an immediate response from a number—what I

had been getting them to do was too difficult, and they could not see how they could apply it. At this point Mrs. _____, the half-caste teacher, and one of the tradesmen, took over and successively and clearly to some degree successfully, rammed home their need to think through their problems, and to think about how to plan, at every stage of a venture, in just the sort of ways that had been illustrated in this session. There seemed, after they had spoken, and answered some questions put them, much more acceptance of the notion that this way of thinking and acting was necessary, but very difficult.

It had clearly been very tough going for all of them—partly because they expected to be lectured to; partly because the ‘identification’ and the naming of the problems, and the stages of thought and action about them, was making very heavy demands (a) on their ability to grasp what it was all about (this gradually was seen), (b) on their willingness to vocalize their ideas; and partly—and I became acutely conscious of this quite early but could not effectively remedy it—my *vocabulary* was an obstacle to effective communication of my ideas and concepts to them. Again and again I would use a term and realize at once I had to try to find a simpler more meaningful word or words for it. Almost as bad as groping for the equivalent in a foreign language of which one is largely ignorant.

(ii) My second session at 2pm two days later did not take place. The morning’s speaker had asked for some of my time to complete an exercise he had planned with the group in the earlier session. This was to be a practical exercise in conducting a meeting—both for three chairmen, in turn, and for the members of the meeting. Every member had been allocated a task (moving a motion; an amendment; or participating in discussion on a motion, etc.). The chairmen had also been instructed. Each had his specific role typed out for him and in his hands. He had only to do as his instructions indicated, imaginatively filled out, at the appropriate time. It was a well-planned exercise. But it was obvious within ten minutes after 2 that what he

was trying to do was quite beyond this group—carefully though they had been groomed; helpful as he was at every turn. Each chairman was so nervous as to be almost inaudible, and incapable of doing what had to be done; each of the meeting members, though their task was simple, in writing, in their hands, had to be cajoled into doing his task, and did so almost inaudibly and very badly. At 4.30 my fellow lecturer wound up his session and prepared to concede the field to me, but the audience, as though called to attention by an inaudible but imperative word of command, stood up and walked out—before him. The method used, and the preparation was sound enough—for a carefully taught and reasonably experienced group of people—say at the end of half-a-dozen sessions on the subject. From this group it seemed to be demanding far too much.

(iii) The next afternoon at 2 I had my second and final three-hour workshop with this group. This time I asked them to suggest quickly a number of topics or problems related to their communities and to the concept of trying to form co-operatives among them; when we had a number of suggestions, they could decide what order of importance these had to them and discuss them in that order. I had the same ‘chalker’ and in a few minutes we had six or seven topics on the board—‘economic insecurity’, ‘trades training’, ‘social inequality’, ‘finding capital and thrift’, ‘adult education’, ‘training management (of co-ops.)’, ‘children’s education’. It was decided to take the last first. There was then a quite good discussion of what were the kinds of problems this involved for them – in relation to schools, parents, and the needs of their community. It brought in also the problems of these people in different States and different parts of some States, and of different ‘civic’ status (e.g. the Natives on the Reserves, on Mission stations, full citizens). The blackboard was filled with headings of what they suggested as the main problems to be faced, with headings of possible fields of action. We also interlocked consideration of the problems of trades training. Then we moved on, at their desire, to look at what they needed in adult education. They quickly nominated

—English expression, arithmetic and bookkeeping, chairmanship and conduct of meetings, homemaking (including practical carpentry) and dressmaking and cooking. Means of securing institutional help in these respects were then briefly canvassed and the importance of their undertaking themselves the task of convincing their own people of their need for adult education were brought out and emphasized by several of them; the inter-relation of adult education with that of children's education, to secure parental support of education for the child, and the place of education in their future as a people, were all stressed.

There were several interesting aspects of this session. First, in contrast to the lamentable session on meeting procedure the previous day, the whole meeting was attentive and animated and a majority spoke (even two of the Torres Islanders), some frequently, a majority several times. The three almost inaudible Chairmen of the previous day, with little encouragement, spoke frequently, clearly, and forcefully. Once, early in the meeting, when a group at the back got into an animated argument about a statement that had been made, the shyest of the Chairmen from his seat in the front row turned round and *roared* for silence and gave them a lecturette on manners in a meeting of this sort. The audibility, vocabulary and clarity of thought of many of those who had no sounds and no words at the previous day's session was revealing. They stood readily to speak, challenged each other's opinions and statements, asked each other or me for clarification of points made, and readily elaborated on statements they made if I asked them to explain more fully, or to explore what they had said more fully—'What did this mean?' 'What would that involve?' 'What do you think *you* should or could do about that?' and 'What do you think the most important ways of going about it?'

The several Europeans present at both my sessions (and the one I did not have)—three with long experience of working with either

aborigines or Melanesians—expressed satisfaction with the ‘method’. One of them who has worked for several years with the co-op. group which was well represented in this School, said he had never known his own people could be so fluent, clear, and forceful. For himself, he realized that much of what he had been attempting had been wrongly approached, and he was certain that he must try to use these more informal and direct methods of working with them rather than on them. The general satisfaction of the audience was evident. The half dozen obvious ‘leaders’ in the group expressed their conviction that they really had learnt a great deal from these two sessions about how they should think about their problems and methods of approach to their people.

The above may be too uncritical an overall impression. I should have had a much better idea of how successful, or not, this method of discussion had been if I could have had, as originally planned, the three sessions—the third of which would have sought to get them to discuss in detail what was involved in a ‘second step’ in forming a co-op. It is clear that the order in which the two topic areas were taken, was the reverse of what I should have done; they should have been encouraged to select the general first and then moved to the particular and more abstract and remote from experience. Greater familiarity with the method employed, and the greater self-confidence secured by more effective participation, should then have made it easier for them to provide the ‘materials’ for their discussion of the more difficult approach.

Again, I probably erred, in the first session, in trying to get them to push on too quickly to provide the whole ‘framework’ of an organizing committee’s tasks, so that they could see the inter-locking relationships between tasks and between ‘sub-objectives’ within the broad objective of ‘their meeting’. If I had been content to secure a few points and then to discuss these in breadth, if not in depth, more participation might have been secured and more understanding

of what was being attempted emerged earlier and more clearly—especially to the majority. I was trying to get them to move too fast. What I had aimed to do in three sessions was cramped by the loss of one session, and probably required four or five sessions to do better and more slowly.

The conditions were not good. The group was too large; too varied in composition in terms of education, experience, ability and willingness to speak in a mixed group of this kind. They sat in rows on backless benches in the tent, which became oppressively hot at times. They were, in the rest of the course, accustomed to being lectured to for the bulk of each period. And—the unknown to me—there were all the cross-currents involved within such a group, among themselves; and the gulf between the group and Europeans. What they were really thinking and saying among themselves, about the course, etc., only they knew. When, at the opening held at the end of the Aborigines' course and the commencement of that for the Europeans, one of the Europeans asked why they didn't come into the rooms where afternoon tea was being held—where the Archbishop, Canons, the Minister for Education and other dignatories were assembled, together with Sydney visitors, European tutors and students—the reply was a muttered 'Look at them—they don't even mix with each other—let alone with us'. Fair comment.

The quality of some of the men (and Mrs. _____) was impressive; they were thoughtful, reflective, and widely experienced; their intelligence was obvious, and one wishes there had been more opportunities for them to exhibit their capacity for leadership. The man from South Australia who moved the vote of thanks to the Minister and the Rev. Clint did so with a brevity, lucidity and sincerity—and a vocabulary—that anyone might envy.

These are all questions, and there are others to be asked, that any group of tutors may find profitable to hammer out. There are numbers of problems involved in using some variant of this 'workshop'

method, in either the 'problem' or the 'subject' situation. It does not afford a substitute for the lecture, but it may offer a useful variant.

A postscript to the session at Tranby. From four different aborigine groups represented at the School has come word that they are hard at work on lines discussed in the sessions reported above.