Learning to listen to Indigenous Voice in the curriculum

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Curriculum development in education is subject to many influences. Education is both framed by society and moulds that society; government policies are played out at the classroom level, with recursive interplay between education and the social context in which it occurs. Sir William Deane (1996) has observed that, “The past is never fully gone, it is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do”. This is certainly the case with Australian Indigenous Studies, where there are historical, social and organisational forces that would test the mettle of skilled lawyers and politicians. Yet many educators in Victoria, as elsewhere, are facing the challenge and are experiencing degrees of success. The topic of this paper is their efforts to ascertain the ‘Why?’ ‘What?’ ‘Who?’ and ‘How?’ of curriculum in the area of Indigenous Studies, predicated on their unshakeable personal commitment to building understanding, trust and respect through collaboration, coupled with persistence and the highest level of ethical conduct in learning to listen to Indigenous voice.

Defining the ‘Why’ of Indigenous Studies
Since colonial times, teachers have been charged with implementing some of the many policies that have governed the lives of Indigenous people. Education policies focused by turns on assimilation, segregation and integration and past educational opportunities for Indigenous students have been limited to the type to fit them for domestic or pastoral work (Fletcher, 1989). Throughout it all, Indigenous people have maintained their struggle for self-determination, recognition and ‘voice’, which in Victoria had been quite literally removed, with the banning of Indigenous languages (Broome, 2001).

Although Indigenous Studies is a relative newcomer to the Australian educational agenda, present-day curriculum developers and teachers are working against a social backdrop of cultural pluralism, Indigenous Reconciliation and workplace anti-discrimination legislation, with the onus on them to interpret ‘sound professional practice’ in this complex and challenging cross-cultural context. If it is true that educational change is driven by a combination of pressure and support, as Fullen (1991) has suggested, policies and directives certainly exist in abundance to provide the necessary impetus and mandate for change. For example, a goal the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1993) is to provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional and contemporary values. This reflects key recommendations of significant reports such as the Royal Commission
into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Elliot, 1991), the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR, 1994) and the Bringing them Home Report on the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (HREOC 1997).

These reports emphasise the importance of education in redressing the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous people, together with the urgency for the wider community to get to know Indigenous Australians. As film-director and musician Richard Frankland (2000) observes,

Most non-Indigenous Australians are being denied a thought-process. It’s up to the people of Australia to be outraged at the situation - the lack of information.

The introduction of meaningful, relevant and accurate Indigenous curriculum perspectives with the input of Indigenous community representatives is closely tied to issues of Indigenous governance and self-determination, which involve the maintenance of identity and culture, the development of the Indigenous community and the development of the individual (DEET / VAEAI, 2000). Just as private enterprise applies the ‘triple bottom line’ test to its endeavours, looking for environmental, social and economic sustainability, it makes sense at this stage of national development to learn about a shared history and to plan an inclusive future that respects and values Indigenous people, culture and heritage, for the benefit of all. Yet until recently, Indigenous achievements, culture and diversity were largely hidden and rarely acknowledged by the Australian media or through education systems (Russell, 2002; Langton, 1996). Aunty Iris Lovett-Gardiner M.A. (1997), Gunditjmara elder, notes,

I don’t think anything will change unless people get a proper aspect on who Aboriginal people are... To live in two worlds, side by side, you need to eliminate discrimination. And education has got to go into schools about Aboriginal people, that there are people here who have a proud heritage. People have got to be educated. Tell the truth about it... Let it be said. Then we can try to find out how we can come together as a people.

Indigenous Studies in Victoria

The year 2000 marked an end to the official federal government Aboriginal Reconciliation initiative, but its influence continues to pulse at the state, organisational and personal levels. The Victorian government produced the Response to the Bringing them Home Report 2002, to acknowledge the relationship between past child welfare policies and contemporary Indigenous disadvantage. The document outlined state strategies addressing the multifaceted recommendations of the report (State of Victoria, 2002). This includes goals for Indigenous education from Yalca: A Partnership for the New Millenium (VAEAI/DEET, 2001) an education policy statement about Koorie Education developed collaboratively between the Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, the representative body of Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in
Victoria (VAELI / DE&T 2000). Yalca: A Partnership for the New Millennium reflects a birth to death philosophy of education, placing the Koorie student at the centre of educational policy development, implementation and decision-making at all levels of education and training. The goals of Yalca are reflected in the mandated state curriculum frameworks.

However, the change process is apparently very slow. Organisational and other blockers appear to exist in some instances. Timetables are crowded, resources stretched. Uncle Sandy Atkinson (Moira) of the Koorie Family History Service has reflected that we tend to set up structures to enable us to achieve outcomes more efficiently, then use the same structures as a way to block progress. Some people may even hide behind the structures and use them to mask their other motives and intentions. With this in mind, it is important to interrogate any organisational structures that seem to block progress in the area of Indigenous education (Irving 2003).

It is true that there may be a cultural stumbling-block for some non-Indigenous educators, who are the products of their own cultures and experiences with limited opportunities themselves to find out about Indigenous culture. In Victoria, few non-Indigenous teachers report that they have knowingly had the chance to listen to Indigenous perspectives and perspective or ‘voice’. Indeed, as many as 80% of the state’s teachers report that they have never met an Indigenous person. This is significant, in that 50% of the Indigenous population of Victoria is under 18 years and therefore represented in classrooms. Obviously, there is a problem of perception and many teachers are failing to see the reality of Indigenous culture as a living, vibrant and evolving force and Indigenous people as individuals (Irving 2003). Cultural awareness training now forms part of many industrial professional development programs (VCM 2000), yet in Victoria, Indigenous Studies is not yet a core requirement for pre-service training, in spite of its recognised importance in the teacher education curriculum (Craven 1996).

Given that ideas and concepts are formed from available information and experiences, inadequate information may impact on the construction of identities of groups within society (Singh, Henry 1998). Lack of information about Indigenous people presents the stage for inaccuracies and the formation of unhelpful stereotypes. Once in place, stereotypical views tend to block effective communication, because they influence expectations, and filter interactions and the interpretation of observations. We see what we expect to see. In terms of the ‘What?’ ‘Who’ and ‘How?’ of Indigenous Studies, the scene would appear to be set to replicate the tired inaccuracies of bygone years. However, some individuals are tackling the task of bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds and bringing fresh relevance, creativity and life to curriculum by creating a new dialogue with Indigenous community representatives.
Listening to the ground

In the course of planning an education forum on ‘good practice’ in Indigenous education, a number of non-Indigenous teacher participants were personally recommended by members of the Indigenous community for their positive attitude and demonstrated commitment to quality Indigenous Studies in their schools: “He/She is doing a good job and trying hard at the school. The heart’s in the right place” was a typical comment. These people became the Koorie Education Awareness Network, a descriptive term about their activities and intentions, rather than an organisational one.

All the teachers were surprised and highly gratified to know that they had been nominated in this way, not feeling that they had done anything out of the ordinary. Notably, while the teachers were conscious of the professional mandate for them to introduce Indigenous Studies in school at the state and system level, their commitment came from a personal conviction it was timely for ‘space’ to be created to facilitate the involvement of Indigenous people in the development and delivery of education programs with local relevance, suited to the school community. They were keenly aware of their personal limitations when working in a complex area. This conviction led them to establish on-going relationships with appropriate Indigenous contacts, sometimes over extended periods, to explore further what Indigenous people felt they would like to see being covered in the curriculum. The Koorie Education Awareness Network resulted, as a collegial network of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Victorian educators. This informal network is best characterised as a community of learners, creating a reflective space for cross-cultural dialogue and reflection, in which opportunities for forming mentoring relationships may arise. It also supports and encourages teachers to establish educational links with their local Indigenous community in order to develop locally-appropriate Indigenous Studies programs. It provides a sounding-board for ideas, links people with similar professional interests and helps to chart successes as a resource-base and inspiration to others to ‘have a go’.

“Listen to the Ground” was an expression of the late Peter Clarke (Wemba Wemba / Latje Latje), a Koorie Education Development Officer from Mildura, who was recognised as an exemplary educator dedicated to furthering social justice, Reconciliation and creating a brighter future for all children. The expression, in the sense of getting back to basics and learning to listen to Indigenous perspectives and ‘voice’, whether in person, through the media or the Arts, serves to describe the activities of teachers who are seeking to deepen their own understanding. They are characterised by their willingness to become risk-taking learners in unfamiliar cultural territory, with good humour at their own failings, by their persistence, flexibility, ingenuity in negotiating institutional blockers that arise and tolerance for ambiguity. Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in education are sharing insights and forming mentoring relationships in this way, seeking to develop their cross-cultural understanding in collaboration with Indigenous community representatives. (Irving, 2002)
In a further exploration of the approach to gaining professional understanding that teachers adopted, a useful lens might be provided by aspects of Barbara Rogoff’s (1997, 1995) work in socio-cultural theory ‘in which there are not distinct boundaries between theory, methods and practice… theory is built on observations of the sociocultural phenomena of the real world and application is seen as principled practice that inherently embodies particular theoretical notions (Rogoff, 1997). A dynamic interplay was evident between the personal, interpersonal and organisational aspects. The mentoring relationships were highly supportive of the affective component of this ‘high-risk’ cultural area of learning where protocols had to be learned through trial and error.

Cultural realities
It is one thing to be aware at the intellectual level of cultural realities and quite another to experience them in everyday interactions with colleagues and mentors. Certain insights have been confirmed for the network participants and are worth noting here: That the Indigenous view of life is a holistic one, where physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional factors exist in balance; that present-day Indigenous communities are diverse and reflect the wide range of backgrounds, cultures, experiences and viewpoints of their members; that decision-making is a consensus process in which all points of view are considered; that time-frames can be longer than expected and time-keeping is often event-driven; that land, life-style and identity are inextricably linked and that land continues to have a central, overriding importance, with a physical, emotional and spiritual significance (VCM, 2000). Also, the personally-sobering fact that sheer pressure of commitments may put a well-meaning teacher’s demands very low in the priority order for attention.

Teachers were pleased to discover that parallel roles exist within the organisational structures of local Indigenous communities and the education system, which facilitated the forming of links and acted as a guide to unfamiliar protocols. Through reflecting on experience, participants developed a practical awareness of cultural protocols and an appreciation that there were truly different cultural dynamics at work. Sometimes, a direct question would receive an indirect answer, a ‘time delay’ response that needed time to come to maturity and was often the more powerful for that. “Elders never go in straight lines”, was a rueful comment and this called for a new type of active-listening ear. They began to recognise the need for persistence, patience and to see that relationships with the local Indigenous community were dynamic. For example, in the case of a reference group, the understandings, agreements and communication channels established through one individual were not necessarily transferable if another person took over the role. Relationships needed to be re-established. At times, the conduct of meetings about Indigenous curriculum content could seem less formal, or more vociferous than they were used to, because people freely expressed their opinion. Even so, the eventual resolutions led to effective outcomes and new understandings. On occasions, teachers were asked to justify their motives, or made an honest error. They report that the
experience of being challenged or corrected in this forum is one that is personally chastening and not easily forgotten. However, an adherence to ‘sound professional practice’, in the knowledge that even an apparent setback offered a new learning experience and an opportunity to demonstrate respect and build trust, enabled them to take correction and guidance with good grace.

Other issues emerged that relate to curriculum development. These included the need to recognise intellectual property rights, as in the use of visual or performing arts; understanding that some information is privileged and not suitable for certain audiences, and that Dreaming stories are the property of the community to which they belong; that Indigenous communities are made up of traditional owners and historical community members, and the issues that arise from that are still being resolved by communities; that the past continues to impinge on the present and that the pain of the separation of children from their families and people from their land are real, and something that we must all own and redress as a nation; that we should be valuing (the Elders’) experience and knowledge and paying them accordingly (McClean, Tolliday). The impact of these experiences within the participants’ workplaces includes the removal of outdated and unsuitable resources, the re-categorising of Dreaming stories from myth to Religion, including in the school budget a component for Indigenous Studies resources, and the invitation to Community members to participate in curriculum development and delivery in appropriate ways, thereby giving value and status to Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy.

In Victoria, Daryl Rose and Theo Read (1999) provide an exemplary model for the kind of cross-cultural collaboration that leads to outstanding educational results, with the processes they used to develop the Gunditjmara earth-science curriculum materials (currently in press). These curriculum materials for upper secondary students, due to be published later this year, bring together traditional knowledge about the land with western science. The high quality of the materials are attributable to Read’s meticulous attention to cultural protocols over a long period when working with the Gunditjara community and the development of relationships based on respect, trust and understanding.

While there can be no shortcuts in building relationships and learning to listen to Indigenous voice, every journey starts with a single step. Ikanbala Richard McClean and Paul Tolliday (2003) ask, ‘Have we, as educators, with the timetable pressures that are on us, got the time and patience to work with Indigenous communities and individuals to make Indigenous education successful? Can we be gently persistent and observe the protocols that are necessary? We must!’ Ultimately, all students will be the winners, with relevant, meaningful and accurate curricula that equally value both ways of knowing and being in the world.
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References


NSW: Australian Film Commission


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