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ABSTRACT

Being able to consider the full range of social and economic issues from different cultural perspectives while maintaining respect and an open mind is a difficult task. The similarities between the latest thinking of Western cosmology and theoretical physics and Indigenous understandings of the bush and its components are striking and provide a theoretical basis for the construction of two-way learning in all Western schools. Democratic reconciliation through a process of two-way learning encourages participants to move within and between paradigms with courage and persistence, to travel boldly, and to think fearlessly. Nyerna Studies, a Bachelor of Education program being conducted in partnership between the Indigenous people of the Echuca region and Victoria University of Technology (Australia), is implementing respectful, democratic, and cultural two-way teaching and learning. The program is open to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and involves studies in education, Indigenous culture and knowing, sport and recreation, and youth and community. The investigation of educational, cultural, and research ideas through a process of integrated, holistic inquiry has shown considerable success. Discussions of the principles and practices of Nyerna Studies indicate that progress is being made in reconciling Indigenous and Western knowing and that collaboration and critique are being transformed into critical dialogue and possibility. (Contains 14 references.) (TD)

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Reconciling Indigenous And Western Knowing

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Reconciling Indigenous And Western Knowing

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Acknowledgement

The views outlined in this paper are being considered and developed by the Nyerna Studies community. They build on a process of respectful two-way learning where the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners form the basis of new understandings of the social and physical worlds.

Abstract

Indigenous communities in Australia desiring access to western culture and knowledge have a major contradiction to resolve in the field of education. It is unlikely that social institutions supported by the state within the hegemonic culture will adopt policies and practices that undermine its own authority, or at least, not to any substantial extent. Minority cultures participating in mainstream life must therefore accept that they will be impacted upon by majority viewpoints and come under some pressure to change. The perspectives of Indigenous mathematics and science for example will inevitably be influenced by contact with the corresponding western perspectives. Nyerna Studies, the Bachelor of Education program being implemented in partnership between the Indigenous people of the Echuca region and Victoria University of Technology, is attempting to come to grips with this contradiction, essentially by a respectful, democratic and cultural two-way teaching and learning. The program has completed its third year in 2000, is open to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and involves studies in Education, Indigenous Culture and Knowing, Sport and Recreation and Youth and Community. Considerable success in the investigation of educational, cultural and research ideas through a process of integrated, holistic enquiry can be reported. The complex notion of culture is central to the understanding of two-way learning and whether culture is to be merely enjoyed or explained, has been subject to ongoing study. Discussions of the principles and practices on which Nyerna Studies is based will indicate that progress is being made in reconciling Indigenous and western knowing and that collaboration and critique is being transformed into critical dialogue and possibility.

Beyond two-way learning

Being able to consider the full range of social and economic issues from different cultural perspectives and, at the same time, maintaining respect and an open mind, is a difficult task. All humans have a complicated cognitive network of knowledge, reflections and experience that result in dynamic and fluid understandings, bias and prejudice being applied to new events every day. At best, it may be possible to work

within a broad paradigm of essential ideas that provide some scope for adaptation and change. To be able to operate from different paradigms, to shift and to move between perspectives, not only requires a democratic commitment to alternative viewpoints, but assumes a cognitive critical mass of reason that enables this to be done.

The notion of two-way learning (see Harris, 1990) does not imply agreement, but rather an appreciation of a different world view, one that has a different history and leads to different modes of action to meet different need. It means that considerable effort must be expended in gaining background information of other cultures and economic systems and at making serious attempts at fitting such information into a social framework that is essentially foreign. The different frameworks are seen to co-exist without one being considered inferior to the other, without one seeking to impose its will. It is recognised that there may be areas of overlap and areas of dissimilarity. In modern societies based on wealth and power, the flexibility and understanding required to have autonomous cultures as minor but equal, may be a contradiction too difficult to resolve.

While it has been strongly contested (see Henry and Brabham, 1994) the work of Harris continues to be referenced as a major contribution in applying two-way learning to the field of Indigenous education throughout Australia. Criticisms involve the concept of cultural domain separation and the idea that Indigenous cultures and world views are incompatible with the non-Indigenous. In broad terms, Harris suggests that there is an Indigenous learning style that encompasses observation and imitation, trial and error, learning real life skills in specific settings and an important role for community processes. The similarity here with democratic enquiry learning is striking and provides a theoretical basis for the construction of two-way learning in all western schools. The question is not one of converting an inferior, informal, short-term approach into a higher order, superior, formal and longer-term approach, but rather one of developing a truly enquiry learning framework within which all children can apply a range of strategies. Beginning with the culture and understandings of learners, enquiry emphasises a unity of practice and theory and of so-called academic and practical knowledge, without privileging one over the other. It also means that viewed in this way, there should not be any reason why Indigenous children fail in western schools, provided that schools are prepared to change to implement a curriculum designed around the features of enquiry and equity for all children.

In a study conducted by Harslett and others (1998), the major characteristics of good pedagogy for Indigenous students were again confirmed as including student-centred and negotiated teaching, flexibility, fairness, knowledge of Indigenous history and culture, small group relationships and strong community links. These factors appear unremarkable and should be pursued by good teachers for all students. The fact that it is extremely difficult to construct a curriculum in regular schooling based on them is the key point. This suggests that western schools are still dominated by a paradigm that transmits rather than transforms and engages where the role of the school is to pass on the valued knowledge and culture, passively and disconnectedly. For this to alter, a new role for primary and secondary schools is required commensurate with the political and educational realities of the present, not the past.

There is however a major point arising from consideration of two-way learning that is often overlooked: do education systems merely attempt to transmit knowledge, in this case from various cultures, or do they set out to transform knowledge on the basis of new experience and contestation of that experience? Is it really a case of establishing the conditions so that different paradigms can co-exist, or are we looking for new paradigms that provide deeper understanding for social improvement? If the latter, then co-existence is insufficient, the outcome of two-way learning must be new ideas and practices that go further, that expressly seek to challenge the present and leap into the unknown. For Indigenous communities, an expectation of two-way learning would be a weakened racism, a significant change in societies that promote exploitation and fear. Accordingly, for non-Indigenous communities, an expectation could involve a set of economic arrangements that recognise joint stewardship of the land where all have responsibility for protection of the natural environment. Such an aspiration of mutual interest of necessity will expand the area of overlap between paradigms or world views. Unavoidable tensions will also be formed.

Nyerna Studies

Now completing its third year of operation, Nyerna Studies, the Bachelor of Education being conducted in partnership with Victoria University of Technology and the Indigenous people of the Echuca region, is at the stage of identifying and theorising the major issues it confronts for educational and reconciliation progress. While such work is still tentative (see Hooley, 2000), the community has been prepared to advance its collective experience and thinking to the academy and for public scrutiny.

As noted above, two main questions have emerged. First, how are different world views that spawn different approaches to teaching and learning brought together so that the understanding of all is deepened and more importantly, challenged? Second, how can the connections between the different communities participating in the program be made more intimate and robust, so that the intellectual journey being undertaken can proceed into more difficult and unknown territory? If the overall task is to establish a quality tertiary program that meets the needs of both the university and the community, pushing the boundaries of education and reconciliation, then these questions must be resolved.

In attempting to integrate across its four subject areas of Education, Indigenous Culture and Knowing, Sport and Recreation and Youth and Community, Nyerna Studies has taken the view that enquiry learning and participatory action research offer an appropriate framework within which to investigate these two questions. The question of the nature and significance of culture and the role it plays in all our lives, has been an underlying theme and will continue to be examined for its explanatory power in regard to learning. Relating to the land will occupy the same position as culture in the program and be equally difficult in understanding for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Nyerna Studies community.

An example of how both issues can be integrated concerns the Indigenous notion of 'The Dreaming' and the European concept of 'Evolution.' Nyerna Studies would prefer not to 'teach about' such complex ideas, but rather 'live the narrative before it is written' and ensure that the community undertakes such scholarly work in a participatory manner. Both issues are central to notions of knowing and identity, both rely on evidence and conceptualisation and both offer explanation for origins and current events. Will it be possible for the different paradigms to be discussed in critical ways and be subject to a range of challenges? Is there overlap of understanding within each to allow alternative viewpoints, indeed world views, to be considered with the respect and openness that the generation of new ideas demand? Can a new relationship between the western geological and Indigenous explanations of landscape be formed, such that each is enhanced, or is competition and dominance inevitable at this stage?

On the question of knowing within Indigenous communities, Rose (2000) has commented that

Country is alive with information for those who have learned to understand. Throughout the world information is spatially dispersed and locally controlled. Events rather than calendrical time, provide information: the world talks about itself all the time.

On the one hand, this may seem difficult for western societies to grasp, but on the other, there are marked similarities with the procedures of western science. The idea of the 'world talking about itself' is familiar to those who may sit on a beach and wonder at the moods of the ocean, the relationship between the wind, sun and water and how the landscape is constantly changing. Experience may show that the fish will disappear when an easterly blows. This information is a process of knowing over time, not the transmission of knowledge slices at a particular time. While 'spatially dispersed and locally controlled' it encourages a consideration of universal knowledge for change and adaptation when brought together with the experience and interpretation of others.

For these philosophical and epistemological reasons, it has become clear in practice, that Nyerna Studies cannot proceed in a traditional university way with the traditional power imbalances. Nyerna Studies must truly adopt a culturally inclusive and respectful approach to teaching and learning, one that begins with the knowledge and understandings of participants, which sees learning occurring over longer periods of time as experience is accumulated and reflection can transform ideas when the learner is ready. It is indeed a privilege and unique experience for non-Koori students to be in a position of interacting with a number of Koori students and community members each day, over a four year period and to be able to investigate a range of serious questions together from different cultural perspectives. Such is the nature of local reconciliation in action.

Prospects for emancipation

In opposing the concept of the meta-narrative as significant universals that guide our thinking and practice for a more equitable and inclusive existence, adherents of the postmodern view suggest that not only have 'grand schemes' failed to illuminate the future, but it is inevitable that this be so; the lessons or events of modernity have always been interpreted incorrectly (see Dodd, 1999; Zeegers, 1999). To escape the oppression of broad views and theories that seek to explain and connect, it is necessary to focus on the locality disconnected from others through time and place and understand the conditions that apply immediately. Presumably, advances in democratic let alone emancipatory practices will occur without outside influence and will spread or not as individual occurrences as the case may be. The demise and rewriting of the uniting narrative does not preclude local narratives from developing, but it does preclude a connection between thinking and acting across a globalised world.

In the confusion of constructing or searching for a universal and normative approach to living, or a pluralist and localised pragmatic, there is a serious need for knowledge practitioners to be clear on how to proceed. This is particularly important when building relationships with students. Reconciling the human and natural worlds may be seen as emancipatory, but not necessarily so, if tradition, history and causal links are unimportant. To engage in an emancipatory process of setting free from those impediments to social and intellectual action, requires a theory of society and practice that includes and explains notions of culture, identity and the conflict between instrumental and moral reason.

In discussing the legacy of Paulo Freire, McLaren (1999) reports that in the struggle for emancipation and 'coming to know' the oppressed '..must develop a collective consciousness of their own constitution or formation as a subaltern class, as well as an ethos of solidarity and interdependence.' Indigenous people have long been excluded from these debates throughout the modern era and there is little evidence to suggest that this has changed compliments of the postmodern theorist. It would be strange to argue that the question of personal emancipation does not apply to all humans, but it is to be expected that social experience and theorising will produce different world views. Perhaps living in harmony with the environment is enough, or human happiness, or a social reason being grounded in praxis giving rise ultimately to a moral existence. Indeed, similarities between an Indigenous view based on small pluralist rather than larger groupings linked by totalising structures, values and procedures, synthesis rather than difference, can be drawn with the postmodern rather than the modern.

Prospects for emancipation of any group take up the key political and economic questions in Australia today, including those of self-determination. For example, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 'expressed the view that self-determination by Australia's Indigenous peoples is 'central to the achievement of the profound change which is required in the area of Aboriginal affairs.' The Commission

defined self-determination as 'the gaining by Aboriginal people of control over the decision-making processes affecting themselves and gaining the power to make the ultimate decisions wherever possible' (quoted in McDonald, 1999). The question of self-determination by groups is a serious matter for postmodern adherents to resolve, particularly if such groups however small in number, may constitute nations in their own right.

It is quite possible to merely describe or interpret events within a narrow framework of personal and local experience; this also fits closely with the postmodern view of social fragmentation. It does not however enable citizens to evaluate their ideas in relation to broader understandings, or to act in solidarity with others nearby or around the world, to consider normative baselines such as social class, gender, religion, disability, ethnicity and Indigenality. Those ideas that arise from experience and guide social and personal practice can be diminished without the rigour of generalised critique and pose a serious contradiction for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who hold this view. It also poses problems for tertiary educators whose work involves utilising the total learnings of the academy and where every idea and proposal is open to maximum scrutiny. Prospects for and the exact nature of emancipatory Indigenous learning are therefore open to question.

Cultural formation

Nyerna Studies has taken a broad and modern view of cultural formation including as Eagleton (2000) suggests guidance 'of living by and for' and in the interests of people around the world who have similar earnest desire. This means that the postmodern concept of multi-cultures is rejected, in favour of a culture that has strong links with the political direction identified by large groups of people. A central repository may include truth, rationality, democracy, sharing, co-operation, inclusiveness, justice and the like, while the outer regions may involve different expressions through dance, music, art and literatures of various types. Culture of this function unites rather than segregates, even across the boundaries of race.

In discussing power-sharing within classrooms from the New Zealand and Maori perspective, Bishop and Glynn (1999) identity narrative pedagogies as a general way of proceeding and comment that the work of teachers

... remains dominated by knowledge codes that are part of a dominant discourse that promotes knowledges-out-of-context and is further shaped by deficiency theorising. Teachers who are members of the dominant discourse have access to these codes; students and their parents from non-dominant ethnic groups may not.

To make progress on resolving such contradictions within the hegemonic cultural arrangements of schools, requires a theoretical framework of exploration, one that is culturally respectful while at the same time enables the generation of new ideas and possibilities, a challenge to the old through practice and experience.

Table 1. shows the major cultural and political components identified by Nyerna Studies to date as having implications for teaching and learning and for the narrative of understanding that is being constructed. The left-hand column depicts the eight fields that have been identified as the key concerns that need to be engaged and resolved at least as working arrangements, so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants can construct their learning in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The fields attempt to describe the components of two-way learning and have applicability for urban, regional and remote communities. The middle column shows some of the major questions that emerge as a result of the field description and which require long-term research investigations. The right-hand column outlines some of the implications for teaching that occur and consequently the sources of research data. To take row 1 as an example, the generation of critique, dialogue and possibility for change and improvement means a consideration of how different perspectives and world views can be respectfully considered for similarities and dissimilarities and how these might promote different structural arrangements and modes of teaching in Nyerna Studies to bring this outcome about. At this early stage of the program, the table is 'work in progress' although one more detailed example is provided later.

Table 1: An elaborated definition of 'two-way enquiry learning'

Field	Research Question	Data
1. Critique, dialogue, possibility.	Bringing different perspectives, world views together.	Modes of teaching.
2. Flexi-mode learning.	Providing different sites of experience, knowledge.	Learning from experience.
3. Learning from the land.	Exploring cognitive connections.	Environment as knowledge site.
4. Socio-cultural.	Enjoyment versus explanation.	Utilisation of arts, technology.
5. Socio-economic.	Economy as the basis of culture and of learning.	Cultural work, organisations.
6. Community. Community	Community knowledge as the basis of understanding.	participation.
7. Reconciliation.	Overlap of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowing.	Experiment and story.

8. Research.

Generation of new knowledge through explicit approaches to theorising.

Participatory action research.

This definition of two-way learning enables a more integrated and expansive approach to be adopted towards western schooling that is attempting to cope with significant yet minority viewpoints. Because of the links with the broad notion of systematic enquiry, a working title could be suggested as 'two-way enquiry learning' thereby providing some theoretical guidance for further investigation. Associated with this as a practical structural arrangement for application, is the idea of 'learning circles' advocated by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in drafting its documents on reconciliation and of course, Freire (1974) as a means of encouraging community groups in their discussion of literacy and connective analysis of important social and political issues. Ultimately, the process of generating practitioner knowledge and emancipatory thought could be seen as the eradication of oppression; under these conditions the priest, police and landlord have no external authority whatsoever, with citizens doing their own thinking and creating their own internal authority. The white cannot dominate the black.

For example, note the piece of independent writing below from a Year 3 Nyerna Studies student when asked to express his experience of the land and the notion of healing:

My healing comes from the land, or the river to be specific and hard physical work. I find it is hard to get the same healing being elsewhere. I have lived in cities before and when I feel down, even being on the river, it is not the same at all and does not have any healing at all. The healing for me comes from being away from people, on the river, in the bush, with nothing to think about other than my technique in the kayak and physically working hard. When I finish these sessions I feel calm, tired and satisfied. I also find that if I enter sessions like this dwelling on a particular problem, a solution presents itself. So it is a form of meditation and when the bush is taken out of it, the formula doesn't work as well. I'm certain that the important factor in this equation is the bush and being on my own.

It is very common for personal thoughts such as these from Nyerna Studies students to reflect on the notions of peace, calm and beauty that being in the natural environment engenders. This relates to the purpose of Indigenous art, where McCulloch (1999) notes that unlike western art, paintings depict '...what is in their heads, in their histories, as a continuation of their spiritual link with their country'. Could it be that the very existence of beauty and elegance as humans understand them are at the heart of the universe and are universals that unite all? The search for healing and harmony, indeed for human perfection of conduct in the broadest sense, may have something to do with the physical complexity of our world, of which we are an integrated part and

the more such relationships are disturbed and distorted, the more our lives become disjointed and unsatisfying. The question of diversity and biodiversity also bears consideration, as these features of the world are diminished at alarming rates. Here again, as part of the material landscape, humans may need to be part of an extensive biodiversity that is healthy and harmonious for us to experience the same. If it is within the very nature of the universe for such physical connections to be created between matter and energy, then this must be part of the human condition as well.

This discussion springing from a spontaneous piece of student writing, shows the first steps of a long journey that brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous science and thinking about the meaning of existence, at least within the same orbit. Both make observations over periods of time and develop an explanation of phenomena that may survive and be communicated for generations, or not. In regards to its place with a framework of two-way learning, it fits nicely into the field above of learning from the land, but also has links with most of the other fields listed. It is an example of how the latest thinking of western cosmology and theoretical physics overlaps with Indigenous understandings of the bush and its components. Democratic reconciliation through such a process of two-way learning encourages participants to move within and between paradigms with courage and persistence, to travel boldly and to think fearlessly. Identity and culture will be strengthened accordingly.

Indigenous education within the non-Indigenous context

In a powerful and courageous commentary on the welfare state and its impact on Indigenous peoples, Pearson (2000) could also be talking about the development of new approaches to schooling that includes all children:

For those of us who take seriously our social responsibilities and who passionately understand and support the important achievement of the welfare state, the Aboriginal experience of welfare in Cape York raises troubling issues for us. It has become patently obvious that the passivity and disempowerment of our welfare condition is, together with racism and the legacy of our colonial dispossession, the fundamental causes of dysfunction in our society.

What further direction or inspiration is required? Redrafting the concept of two-way learning into two-way enquiry learning as a consequence of the work of Nyerna Studies over the past three years, provides considerable guidance for the conduct of teaching, curriculum and assessment in western schools for all children, but Indigenous in particular. As a project of modernity that sets out to investigate the broad ideas on which social progress is pursued and as a direct counter weight to the postmodern, two-way learning has the potential to create new educational vistas of practice and cognitive success for all children.

Table 1. may have more direct application with schools and universities where interaction occurs with smaller numbers of students and linkages with communities

are more explicit. The fields of action relate to students of all ages. Whereas other approaches have tended to concentrate on learning style alone, perhaps isolated within schools, the redrafted approach attempts to encourage the holistic enquiry style across all fields so identified. The implication for this within formal programs of study, is to establish integrated connections as much as possible both between year and age levels and between predetermined subjects, so that there is maximum and independent scope for student decision making on the pursuit of learning interests as they flow across as many aspect of social life as possible. The logical extension of such an approach is not so much the collapse of subjects, but the creation of teams of learners who achieve negotiated learning outcomes over time and which can be seen to constitute formal western subjects as they accumulate.

For Indigenous students working within western institutions, the framework of learning needs to be fashioned such that the different paradigms of culture can in the first instance co-exist, but then seek to move beyond as intellectual transformations occur. Methods of assessment must obviously not restrict this process, but enhance as the products of learning become more visible to those who would see. The following case is presented as data concerning the progress being made at Nyerna Studies on these matters and reconciliation in particular; it reports on a classroom incident:

'As far as I'm concerned, all people are born equal!'

With somewhat of a flourish, the student sat back in his chair convinced I reasoned, that he had made a definite statement about his view. Like most students, he was drawing on his own experience first and the experience of working with a group of Koori and non-Koori students for the past couple of years. The program is unique in this latter regard, with most non-Koori Australians never having the opportunity of working seriously and respectfully on serious questions over an extended period of time with Koori colleagues and friends. As a result, or as a reinforced result, the student was expressing his opinion against bias and prejudice, that all people are born equal.

I took a deep breath and looked around the room at the other students present, a mixture of ages, Koori and non-Koori, different year levels and a couple who had only joined the program recently. It went through my mind that a similar event some time ago might be handled in a certain way. A young Koori woman sitting opposite picked up the reading we had been discussing on equity and which had prompted the comment. Pointing to a particular paragraph with great calmness she said quietly:

'You know Bob you could be right, all people may be born equal - but we have a vastly different heritage!'

Those in the room pondered this exchange in silence for a few seconds and then returned to the reading. Nothing more needed to be said, the meaning was very clear. What more could be expected from any formal education program,

two young Australians coming to grips with some of the great issues of our time, any time, challenging and stretching their own consciousness, learning from each other and being prepared to carefully consider a political perspective from a different culture, history and understanding. If a university requires hard data and immediate results on quality, here they are.

I suspect that all present went home that night knowing they were privileged for the experience.

At the beginning of a new century, the world-wide trend for Indigenous respect and self-determination encompassing as it does victories against systems of apartheid, is not only one of the most significant trends in human history, but one that must be resolved before substantial steps can be made against social blights such as poverty and racial discrimination. A redrafting of the concept and practice of two-way learning into a system of two-way enquiry learning for large numbers of students around the world, a reconciliation of Indigenous and western knowing, will make a contribution in this regard.

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