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Blurring the boundaries: Sharpening the focus

Revelling In Cultural Diversity: Narrative Learning For Indigenous Children

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Abstract

It is of national concern that the capacity of the regular curriculum of Australian schools to meet the needs of Indigenous children seems to be severely limited, particularly at the secondary level. The expansion of secondary education after World War II has resulted in an overall retention rate to year 12 of 70-80 percent, whereas the retention rate of Indigenous students is about half that figure. In an attempt to address such systemic failure, this paper discusses curriculum features such as 'two-way inquiry learning' as key design principles for a communicative and culturally-inclusive approach to learning for all children. The concept of narrative curriculum is suggested to extend across all subject areas including science and mathematics as an integrating mechanism. Narrative builds upon the direct experience and community lives of families, but extends this through systematic reflection to construct new ideas and practices for ongoing social action. Clearly radical curriculum change of this type that is more attuned to Indigenous ways of knowing is urgently required if Indigenous children are not to be discriminated against and excluded by the regular school curriculum.

Introduction

Since colonisation of Australia by the British in 1788 and Federation in 1901, the education of Indigenous Australian (which refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) children has been almost a total failure. A vigorous debate that has been conducted in Australia over recent years regarding the writing of Indigenous history since British settlement, illustrates the context of this shameful outcome. Reynolds (1981, p. 99) for example in an early work made his famous assertion that 'For the continent as a whole it is reasonable to suppose that at least 20 000 Aborigines were killed as a direct result of conflict with the settlers.' While this figure was advanced as an estimate based on data available from various parts of Australia, some other writers have viewed it as a political exaggeration. Windschuttle (2002) claims that there has been a systematic attempt at magnifying conflict between Aboriginal peoples and settlers by left-leaning historians so that the left-political cause can be strengthened. In commenting on *The Secret River*, a recent book by Kate Grenville, Windschuttle (2005, p. 2) observed that 'Those people who now believe the story of guns and violence against Aborigines will be comforted by a book like that. Not one mind will be changed.' Coming to grips with frontier violence in Australia whatever its extent is clearly a challenging and emotional process for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike.

Indigenous education

In his work with Brazilian peasants, Paulo Freire (1972) saw reading and literacy not as a set of instructions regarding discrete skills, but as a constructive process of meaning and social critique. He established culture circles that would identify significant issues in the lives of the people and which would then discuss major ideas and concepts. These could be recorded in sketches as the initial basis for reflection and analysis, very similar to the technique of case writing now adopted in a number of academic disciplines including education (Cherednichenko et al, 1997). Critical literacy and knowing of this type locates all learning within a socio-cultural context, dignifies the experience of daily life and encourages a broad range of expression for an explicit social purpose.

Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness has strong implications for Indigenous peoples around the world as they and their children struggle for survival and meaning within settler societies. A background of oral communication and the centrality of cultural forms and ceremony for the transmission of knowledge, law, history and tradition rather than the use of writing immediately sets up a contradiction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning. Organisational arrangements in European schools and universities involving all students could easily be structured around culture circles for example, except for the rigid vies of the dominant culture that valued knowledge needs to be passed on formally from the expert to the novice.

Indigenous philosophy also suggests that the world is holistic in nature, that all parts living and non-living are connected and that humans are a part of the landscape along with other inhabitants such as rivers, trees and animals. There is a close correlation here between Indigenous and non-Indigenous theories where western science proposes a relationship between matter and energy with species changing in complex systems over long periods of time. In this respect Mother Earth constitutes a major and perhaps linking concept in the theories of Evolution and the Dreaming. Postulating the idea of both connecting with and learning from the land and environment brings peoples from different cultures together and provides a generalised framework for the human quest of knowing and learning. In commenting on the related view of Semchison (2001) that,

The circle of life encompasses the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. True knowledge is only acquired by the use of all these four elements and this is the Indigenous approach to knowledge. Touch it, taste it, smell it, see it, hear it, love it, then live it,

a pre-service teacher at Victoria University wrote:

This is the system that could be used for all schools. This shows students how without telling them what to do. Their own explorations would give them the answers that would fulfil any curriculum. Who says that students cannot study algebra in primary schools? If students' wanderings take them there it should be supported. Indigenous people with their deep associations with the land used this theory because everything that they needed to know was in their natural

environment. The circle of life shows you the way and this way is an infinite way of learning. Our job as teachers is to find environments that give students the inspirations to go down paths that fulfil the outcomes demanded of us.

Whether this view is correct or not, it is certainly the case that the conceptualisation of a broad unity in any way and the possibility of working across difference throughout humankind is a point of acrimonious debate. Admittedly this debate is undertaken primarily amongst privileged academics from the advanced economies, but it does impinge on how Indigenous learning is approached within formal structures. The principles of modern enlightenment suggest that a future of moral rationality, reason and justice for all looms on the horizon, while a postmodern view contends that such a historical process has already ended and that an instrumental reason dominates. For Indigenous people immersed in centuries of action against racism, discrimination and disadvantage, the debate may seem abstract and unimportant, but it has had an influence on social policy and organization in countries of European descent. It is paradoxical however that the conflict between modernism and postmodernism has seriously overlooked the Indigenous question. Issues of equality, self-determination and justice however make this very much a project of modernity.

Restructuring secondary education

In Australia, the education of Indigenous peoples within schools and universities has not been successful (Mellor and Corrigan, 2004). It is significant that primary school education with its focus on language development in its broadest sense, active learning and the care of young children engages Indigenous children to a much greater extent than what occurs at the secondary level. In the latter case, predetermined knowledge is broken into separate parts generally without linkages and the approach to learning is often teacher-centred and passive. This is particularly so in the senior years with considerable pressure being exerted by universities regarding subject content and selection procedures. Under these circumstances, it is quite understandable that there is a high dropout rate of Indigenous students around the age of 15 or 16 when the contradictions between the socio-cultural ways of knowing become very acute. An obvious first step at rectification is to restructure secondary schools along primary school lines, with knowledge being investigated in holistic and integrative domains.

It cannot be claimed that little theoretical and practical work has been implemented to guide such restructuring. The issue of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) for example can pick up on Indigenous questions, where it is recognised that the learner has many points of engagement with experience and that a school curriculum can be arranged to ensure that this occurs. Multiple intelligence as a theory of human psychology is not without its critics of course (Kincheloe, 2004). The concept of reflective enquiry advocated by Dewey (Brookfield, 1995; McDermott, 1981) as understood by Australian teachers goes past the notion of multiple intelligences however and attempts to link students' totality of culture and cognition with the task at hand. The central feature of such an approach is often that of challenging and collaborative projects which flow across traditional knowledge boundaries and look for creative open-ended solutions to

problems or areas of student interest. Enquiry brings practice and theory together through the bridging process of reflection and proceeds through cycles of experiment and analysis. The Indigenous approach of holistic social and intellectual dialogue around serious issues of importance to the community, is exactly that.

In addition to the above, the Australian theory of two-way learning (Harris, 1990) has also provided direction for Indigenous education. This technique can be interpreted in various ways, but generally involves complete respect for the different backgrounds and ways of knowing of different groups and an appreciation of the different learning styles that each group may have. For example, a particular cultural grouping may proceed with a strong emphasis on learning through practice and communication that is essentially community-based, oral and informal. On the other hand, a second cultural group may place importance on knowledge that is encoded in a range of texts and challenges between members that are more formal and institutionalised. Criticism of this approach includes an inevitability of the stronger domain subsuming the weaker and the need for domain separation to ensure that each culture can develop unimpeded.

The concept of two-way learning in Australia has been extended recently to include that of 'two-way enquiry learning (Hooley, 2002). This is an attempt to ensure that assimilation or colonisation of knowledge does not occur, but that the respectful relationship between paradigms supports cultural evolution and generates new knowledge through a process of Deweyan enquiry. For Indigenous peoples, the majority of whom in Australia live in a small number of cities and towns along the east coast rather than remote areas and who may not fully practise traditional life styles, two-way enquiry learning offers a systematic means of dealing with the similarities and differences that co-exist within white European society, while at the same time, attempting to forge new principles of community as both the local and global circumstances alter. Being respectful of different cultures and histories may result in the production of separated multi-cultures, multi-literacies with their own antagonistic localised truths and rationalities, rather than a more interconnected and fluid network of cultural principles, mutually supportive in the public interest. Democratic public spheres of this character will potentially see social progress being made 'elsewhere' as being of importance 'herewhere' shrinking the difference between local and global perspectives.

For educationalists working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, the above discussion brings together the important questions of structure and culture. With many Indigenous students being unsuccessful in formal schooling from the non-Indigenous point of view, what practical steps can be taken to restructure schools so that the cultural basis of learning is recognised and made explicit in everyday terms? What does the timetable of a two-way enquiry curriculum look like, for example? How does enquiry work itself out across all subject areas? What notice is taken of Indigenous science, mathematics, philosophy and literature as holistic and integrated concepts? Can a structure of European technological literacy provide at least cognitive footholds for a literacy that is essentially oral? Primary schools appear extremely well placed to deal with these questions and to establish high quality practices of culture circles, integrated learning and links with community issues that will bring the ideas of Freire, Gardner,

Dewey and others in the grand tradition of systematic and reflective enquiry to life in Australian settings. Prospects for Indigenous students in secondary schools should be equally bright if the civic and epistemological courage required for each change is evident.

Discursive environments

The notion of a discursive environment (Cherednichenko et al, 2001) for teaching and learning invokes an atmosphere of respect, recognition and reciprocity where participants communicate, question and engage with each other around significant issues. This dialogue will take place within and be mediated by the political climate experienced by schools. For teachers, curriculum planning will be a major aspect of discussion and provide an opportunity for reflection on practical classroom work, as well as prospects for more systematic change, that is the bringing together of practices and the essential ideas contained therein. The study conducted by Cherednichenko et al (2001) which forms the basis of this section, has indicated that the discursive conditions which encourage such a collegial approach to the organization of teaching, also apply to the learning for children. Given that, it is now appropriate to consider how this approach might impact upon the actual arrangements for teaching in schools.

The specific programmatic features of a discursive environment for teaching and learning will vary depending on the specific purpose of each school. One scenario arising from this study involves the development of a discursive environment for both primary and secondary schools where Indigenous children are enrolled. Under these circumstances, the discursive environment is conceptualised as consisting of three broad features, those of discourses, structure, culture and a number of specific components, as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Discursive Learning Environment

Features	Components
Discourses	Professional discourses School and social discourses Practical theorising
Structure	Learning circles Mentoring Conversation to production
Culture	Community partnerships Knowing and doing Two-way inquiry learning

Each feature is described in general terms and some detail is synthesized from the data

contained in this report. While such data comes from a particular school, the scenario is seen as having application across schools with an Indigenous population. The description attempts to background each feature by providing some case examples, some brief comment on the case and some linkage with Indigenous education that can be referenced in the literature.

1. Discourses

The research project and its methodological texture including case and commentary writing, site visits, validation conferences, meetings, personal communication, collections of student work, have contributed to the professional discourses surrounding key educational questions for all participants. Discourses are taken to be the totality of public communicative means by which colleagues engage with specific questions regarding their working lives. In the words of Foucault (1972, p. 38), a 'discursive formation' exists when we can describe 'between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion whenever between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations).' Such discourses encountered here have been diverse including professional development, consideration of how school programs are connected with broader social trends and the underlying teacher thinking that guides proposals for change. Initially, the nature of discourses may have been site-dependent, but as the research unfolded, interdependent characteristics emerged as participants investigated issues from a broader experiential base.

1.1 Professional discourses, development and enquiry

It now appears that all students are actively involved in the First Steps program; even those with low skill levels. There does not appear to be students opting out or time wasting as happened earlier. From your writing, I wonder if this change has come from the introduction of the program itself, the change of seating within the classroom, or something that you have failed to give yourself credit for ie your own continued and positive relationships and also your improved understanding of the learning needs of those students. (Case Commentary, 1998.)

Comment such as this moves from focusing on a small and tangible change to a more expanded theoretical view of relationship and learning. It suggests that the change itself is important in its own right, but a deeper significance may be the opening up of other questions for ongoing investigation. The communication is also positive and supportive laying the groundwork for professional and equitable dialogue.

1.2 Linking school and social discourses

With an open invitation and only six students left in the class, Chris began to tell how this program showed rock paintings and places where Macassans had visited the Kooris. Chris rested his elbows on his knees and went on to explain that the min mins were important spirits to the Kurnai and that they came from 'up there' (meaning Arnhem

Land). His facial expressions clearly demonstrated he was talking about serious and important facts that related to his community. True to his Koori culture, the story he told threaded around an event when a war happened and the min mins had come to help the Kurnai. (Case, 1997.)

Note. The word 'Koori' refers to the Indigenous peoples of South-Eastern Australia and 'Kurnai' to a particular tribe in Victoria.

Disconnecting the classroom from culture, history and community is impossible when working with Koori students. A discussion initiated by the teacher in some way, will link with important community stories and events and often conflict with other versions, such as native title, responsibility for stewardship of the land and explanations for events that have occurred. Religious and spiritual connections are often present, aspects that may not be obvious in non-Indigenous classrooms.

1.3 Practical theorising

Third term saw an improved level of student responsibility for their own learning, the seating plan addressed some poor student dynamics and I believe the students work more confidently in an environment where the rules are consistently applied, explicit and commonly understood. Staff work has increased, there is a heightened level of expectation from one another, but the teaching has improved and subsequently so to the student outcomes. Isn't that what we're on about? (Case, 1999.)

This extract outlines a number of theoretical propositions very briefly, but shows how the teacher is placing classroom observations in a more general frame, concepts such as student responsibility, student dynamics, understood procedures and the link between teaching and outcomes. A superficial 'what works' approach is not evidenced, but rather a continuing and probably speedy connection between classroom experience and explanation.

2. Structure

Schools embody a complex mix of structural girders and reinforcements around which teaching and learning proceeds. These girders are formal and informal, are related to curriculum, policy and decision making and which by their very constitution give an insight into the educational and social role of the school. According to Giddens (1984), the idea of structure concerns both social practices and moral action with 'structuring properties' binding space and time in social systems. Structural concerns have figured large in the research involving the way year levels and particular classrooms are arranged, the relationships between staff, between staff and community and between staff and students and the processes by which issues are worked through to resolution. How structures connect with other school issues and whether there is a linear or cyclical relationship is a major question.

2.1 Learning circles

I now value students as complete people, I consider students beyond the class time allocated. I know almost all of the students in the school, they know me, we will spend time together sooner or later. The same cannot be said of other schools. Our school is not divided into complete units or year levels, we operate more on a team basis; teachers do have a classroom responsibility, but it is likely I will need to develop a relationship with each student because I will be in that class or allocated to an excursion/activity that will require I engage those students in a personal and meaningful way. (Case, 1998.)

In this case, description is provided of a school where the structural frame of the school has not been decided, or is a state of almost constant review in an effort to do better. The timetable may show a more traditional arrangement of subjects, teachers and hours, but there is a recognition that people interact and need to interact in a Koori school, in a different way permitted by the forms of organization adopted. In a school of this small size and with whatever structural arrangements emerge, it is clear that teachers see themselves working with students as a collaborative group to meet learning outcomes of mutual benefit.

2.2 Mentoring

The first days were difficult. I had a prep/one class of loving kids and I loved them back. But there were no results, planning or direction left for me by the previous teacher. I had no idea what levels they were, what they had done, nor who was who. So at the beginning of term four we started the school year again. Having come to terms with that, the second hurdle was remodifying my teaching methods as my previous bag of tricks didn't work here. The trust situation was evident from the start. If a mutual trust is established then you are nine tenths there. So we learnt to trust each other, which isn't really difficult for the preppies, but took much longer with the secondary kids. (Case, 1998.)

Working with Koori children demands a very personal and trusting teaching and learning environment, one that brings people together rather than one that merely and formally transmits knowledge. Issues of love, trust and a genuine recasting of teaching techniques on a daily basis means that traditional structures of schooling need to be at least questioned for their appropriateness and the cultural interconnectedness of learning understood.

2.3 Conversation to production

The reform movement that our middle years has undergone will be trialed throughout the state, each teaching team will now need to focus on a particular topic they would like to investigate and develop. Bob and I have chosen creative thinking, metacognition and developing critical thinking skills in the kids as a priority. These areas are very broad and we intend to visit sites where examples of this topic are refined. The readings and texts which relate to this topic are somewhat dry and have a familiar ring of sameness about them. Also interestingly, the quoted examples are generally steeped in primary level teaching practices and schools. Perhaps it's time things changed! (Case, 1999.)

As well as students moving from ongoing communication and conversation, the cases show evidence of the teachers constantly looking for better practices as they work with students and experience the fruits of their labours. There is a backwards and forwards process being undertaken, where the practices of the school within its structural framework enable students and teachers to interact with each other and where changes are made accordingly. The production of understanding for both results and forms a tentative accommodation of view for the next cycle of activities.

3. Culture

Koori education is a cultural experience of itself and problems with teaching and learning in European schools are inevitable if a culturally-inclusive curriculum is not present. Eagleton's (2000, p. 131) view that 'Culture is not only what we live by. It is also in great measure, what we live for' builds on the view of Williams (Eagleton, 2000, p 119) that 'Culture is a network of shared meanings and activities never self-conscious as a whole, but growing towards the advance of consciousness.' Advice such as this provides a guide when working with Koori students, rather than the view that culture is passive, known and should be conveyed through particular school subjects. The expression of culture found in this study involved a strong interrelationship between school and community, the way that knowing and doing inform each other and the means by which respect can be shown for the different cultural spheres within which teachers, students and their families find themselves. Culture is an oft-used but contested term; it needs to be carefully defined when schools have a Koori population of whatever size and a clear and sensitive distinction made between multiculturalism and Kooriculturalism.

3.1 Community partnerships

I started at this school with a view to working in a field that is extremely difficult for a gub to access. I knew I possessed skills and had experience that was badly needed at a new school that catered for both primary and secondary levels. I had only a limited experience working with Koori students that was restricted to a mainstream setting. I did have personal relationships with Koori parents that turned out to be significant and extremely important. (Case, 1998.)

Note. The term 'gub' refers to a non-Indigenous person.

The issue of relationship between teacher and student and between Koori and non-Koori people is a dominant theme of this work, expressed in various ways. An attempt at formalizing this relationship as a partnership between the school and community across all aspects of school life including policy, curriculum and decision making demonstrates the respect of cultural groups for each other and provides a systematic structure within which the work of the school can live and grow.

3.2 Knowing and doing

Throughout each case there appears to be a number of themes that are common to each, that is that at first there is a sense of frustration felt by all teachers at the initial stage of the program. This frustration stems firstly from varying sources including an acknowledged lack of confidence by many students in their own abilities to learn and secondly a perceived problem with the general dynamics of the classroom. Whether this negative classroom behaviour resulted from a lack of co-operation with staff or other students, or was in fact a negative attitude to an individual style of learning, which this program to some extent requires if it is to succeed, now appears to be making way for greater co-operation. (Commentary, 1998.)

In this commentary, the educational discourse being promoted by case writing is exhibited by the support and analysis provided, particularly in the progress that is being tracked by colleagues and the changes that are occurring. Again, as noted above, there is this constant reworking of ideas as they are born from practice, modified and pressed into service. Knowing is a function of doing and doing a function of knowing, even if this is not explicit in the daily operation of schools. For Koori students such explicitness seems to be essential.

3.3 Two-way enquiry

Michael continued on to describe how the min mins got to Gippsland and made constant links with the book we had been reading, the television program and the stories he knew. I asked questions, the remaining members of the class quietly listened and I felt that the atmosphere of the class was something quite special. Michael demonstrated to me how he had made not just connections, but given meaning and depth to what was being talked about, seen and experiences that were important. Events that happened generations ago still have relevance for him. I thanked him for sharing this knowledge with us and continued on with the classroom task in a calm manner. The group decided to design their own Macassan village from the information we were given from the novel. (Case, 1997.)

In continuing the case encountered earlier, the teacher provides a deep insight into the interaction between a group of people as they come to grips with cultural connections and explanations of the world they inhabit. Each is communicating with the other in a respectful manner as they lay open their histories and heritage for scrutiny and hopefully understanding by the other. There are strong elements of democratic contact here and a recognition that there are different eyes viewing different worlds. It also seems that there is little evidence of domination, it is enough to discuss, inform and encourage the making up of minds in an independent manner.

Structures of teaching and learning need to ensure that domination, assimilation or colonisation of knowledges of one culture by another does not occur. Two-way learning as envisaged here is an attempt to set up a respectful relationship between paradigms of living and world view supportive of cultural evolution and the generation of new

knowledge and challenge through a process of democratic enquiry. For Indigenous peoples, multi-age learning circles in primary and secondary schools with the assistance of mentors and elders embracing holistic and integrated domains of knowledge, provides a systematic means of dealing with the contradictions they experience with European society and for the restructuring of schools for all children.

Narrative and two-way inquiry: new curriculum forms

In considering the general questions of Indigenous education, the suggested features of a discursive environment noted above are just that: some suggested ideas based on an analysis of the data available to date. Much more investigation is required to clarify the issues involved and how they resonate with the practical life of classrooms across Australia. In addition, more extensive learnings from the literature need to be incorporated to temper local interpretations with a broader experience. As Phillips (2005, p. 24) suggests our perceptions of cultural difference should allow two directions to be followed in the classroom:

to build deeper understandings in non-Indigenous students about their relationships to Indigenous peoples and, as teachers, to ensure that Indigenous children have the opportunity to build on their own cultural worldview, rather than be assimilated into the dominant framework.

At this stage therefore some summary remarks are offered below to glimpse beyond and to challenge current interpretations and understandings.

Narrative. Particular cultural groups may proceed with a strong emphasis on learning through practice and communication that is community-based, oral and informal. Others may place more importance on knowledge that is encoded in a range of texts and exchanges between members that are more formal. Multi-age groupings with the guidance of a mentor could proceed in cycles of dialogue and communication around the essential ideas of a project with each draft consisting of both written and non-written outcomes. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are then engaged in a practical expression of their ideas in very tangible ways that draw upon cultural backgrounds and which begin to show how practice and theory reveal themselves in particular events and descriptions of particular items. This is the notion of narrative, a systematic process of inquiry that begins with personal and community history and interest, which documents and confronts significant issues and which ultimately lays the basis for the generation of new ideas to explain and resolve current situations. It is suggested here that narrative becomes a key organising and learning principle for Indigenous children in all schools, in all subjects.

Community. Learning within Indigenous communities relies upon family and social background, the sharing of knowledge and experience particularly through the involvement of respected elders, a framework of practical learning and the notion of from the community to the community; at various points in your life when ready, you may find knowledge, or knowledge may find you. Schools must consider the many

contradictions that exist between their approaches to teaching and learning and how such Indigenous features can be incorporated as a central aspect of a program. With an emphasis on communication both oral and written, the question of European literacy is extremely important and may provide an intellectual architecture on which Indigenous learning can be formed. Experiential, whole language learning may provide the direction, while a mix of culture, linguistics, experience and reflection appear to be essential elements of democratic dialogue and learning for Indigenous children.

Learning Circle. In many Indigenous nations around the world, the concept of circle is most significant and demonstrates an understanding that all creatures and component parts of nature are bound by kinship relationships. All of these are respected and honoured in various ways and are celebrated in song, dance, painting and ceremony. Some circles show equality, wholeness, the circularity of time, the relationship between the seasons and between north, south, east, west, while others are seen as a process of healing, perhaps because of European occupation. The discussion above takes up this broad philosophical concept of circle, perhaps 'circle of life' and accordingly, suggests a number of principles for the restructuring and reculturing of all schools to meet the needs of Indigenous students. These principles are those of discursive environment, discourse, structure and culture involving democratic multi-age learning circles instead of year levels, the participation of respected others as mentors rather than teachers and community partnerships for curriculum and decision making. For many schools, such discursive rearrangements will require a strong and enduring commitment to civic and epistemological courage.

Mentoring. Reconstructing the notion of teacher to that of mentor is appropriate for the democratic and inclusive operation of learning circles. It is much more culturally inclusive and respectful for the relationship between the Indigenous child and adult in a school setting to be that of learner and mentor rather than novice and expert. In the former case, the conditions are being established for challenging and collaborative projects that look for creative and open-ended ways of thinking about serious issues and which do not rely on the hidden knowledge of a powerful teacher. Mentoring will also enable the introduction of a broader range of assessment techniques that respect and recognise the knowledge of Indigenous peoples and allow a full expression of such values and life directions.

Perspective. Parents, teachers and students construct their own explanations of life every day and act upon them. Teachers are constantly searching for and implementing new approaches that they consider will meet the needs of their children, a process of practical theorising. Educational discourses at the school level are often not seen as embracing a theoretical component, but to see teaching and learning as not a unity of practice and understanding to guide further practice, underestimates how humans constantly interact with and transform their environments. Indigenous peoples have their own explanations, stories, lores, traditions that constitute a way of knowing about the world and which must be brought into the curriculum. This means working with such a philosophy for curriculum and teaching reform so that an Indigenous perspective permeates across the curriculum, rather than teaching about Indigenous issues

in a humanities unit for example, while the rest of the curriculum remains unaltered. A recognition of the existence and essential makeup of the practical theorising of all people and children is a major first step that will lay the foundation for structural change.

Curriculum. A curriculum design that segments knowledge into separate categories to be considered by different age groups, builds in structural rigidities that make it more difficult for children to approach knowledge and learning. The concept of multi-age learning circles of whatever year level may help overcome such restrictions. Indigenous philosophy suggests that the world is holistic in nature, that all parts living and non-living are connected and that humans are a part of the landscape along with the rivers, trees and animals. A learning circle must therefore adopt a holistic approach to learning generally and an integrated approach to school knowledge in particular. Student-initiated and negotiated projects based on their interest and background offer a means of bringing institutional and personal knowledges together in cycles of investigation and synthesis. The learning circle of an entire school will be responsible for deciding its own curriculum and the manner in which it will deal with guidelines and materials.

Attempting to establish democratic discursive environments for teaching and learning emphasising systematic narrative inquiry and two-way inquiry learning as envisaged here for Indigenous communities confounds the defining characteristics and assumptions of many schools in Australia. As Mandawuy Yunupingu (Wignell, p. 1) describes: 'My experience as part of Yothu Yindi illustrates the meaning of double power. In Yothu Yindi, we bring together music, ceremony, lyrics and technology from two cultural traditions into a fusion which produces something new and different.' The insights of the discussion above indicate that a reconciliation framework of 'double power' may be the way to proceed.

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