

Indigenous students: who do we think they are?

In Tasmania, perhaps more than anywhere else in Australia, the matter of identity has been a critical one. Contested, denied and redefined - the descendants of this island's Indigenous people have had to struggle for acceptance against a political and historical narrative that continues to question what it is to be Aboriginal. Conflict has arisen primarily because many non-Aboriginal people have assumed a right to judge and define Aboriginality, often contradicting the understandings and experiences of Aboriginal people themselves.

One of the foci of the Stronger Smarter project is to support Indigenous students to embrace a positive sense of their own cultural identity. If we are to do this in a way that builds the capacity and resilience of young Aboriginal people, we will have to be wary of introducing 'third-party' interests in the business of identity. It will be a significant and critical challenge for Aboriginal communities to work with schools in defining what Aboriginality is and how it should be supported. The great risk is that we might succeed in perpetuating disadvantage or worse, impede the creative ability of young Indigenous people to configure their own ways of being in an increasingly complex world.

Introduction - Slide 1 - Mick

This is the second most well-known Tasmanian Aboriginal person in the world. He is not only well-known to Aboriginal people across Australia, but a surprising number of non-Aboriginal Australians can recognize his face, know his name and have a cast iron opinion about his politics - even though very few have ever met him.

I will always remember standing in the airport in Adelaide many years ago talking with Mick while we were waiting for a flight to Alice Springs. It was

not long after he had returned from his fabled trip to Libya where he supposedly met with Moumah Kadaffi to obtain terrorist funding for an Aboriginal uprising (neither of which actually happened). A well-dressed woman approached us and interrupting our conversation demanded to know how he had dared to consort with terrorists. Mick politely, but firmly waved her away, saying that he did not wish to talk with her. This triggered an explosive tirade in the middle of the departure lounge, about how we should have all been 'shot out' when they had the chance.

## Slide 2 - Trukanini

The most well-known Tasmanian Aborigine is no doubt Trukaninni. She was a diplomat who negotiated treaties for her people and a freedom fighter who narrowly escaped hanging in Melbourne for her role in a guerilla campaign against sealers. But her fame is based on the assertion that she was the 'last of her race'. I'm sure the ambiguity is not lost here. In Tasmania, Aboriginal people are 'damned if we do, and damned if we don't'. We are told we do not exist, but are abused when we are noticed.

So how has this come about and why is it important for the future of Aboriginal education in Australia? - because it is of critical importance to understand what has happened on this island if the rest of Australia wants to know what it is in for over the next few decades.

I would like to spend some time today with you to look at the Indigenous experience in Tasmania and to tease out some implications for how we treat the business of Indigenous culture in our schools - especially those in urban and regional areas.

Chris Sarra's Stronger Smarter Communities project will roll out across schools in every jurisdiction in the next few years, supported by \$16.4 million in funding which Deputy PM Julia Gillard says will **'help ensure that school leaders across Australia are supported and challenged in ways that**

will help them turn outcomes around for Indigenous students’.

One of the foci of the Stronger Smarter project is to support Aboriginal students to embrace a positive sense of their own cultural identity. I don’t imagine that there is anyone at this conference who would argue that this is not vitally important. But it is a far from simple task, because we are talking about something that is often discussed, but poorly understood in its diversity of context and its complexity of meaning.

Every Aboriginal person in this room has a very clear understanding of their own identity - its strengths, its limitations and the effects it has on our lives. But we have less understanding of each others’ identity. What should be a complex and rich conversation between us is all too often conducted with reference to a handful of rhetoric and premature agreement that assures us we are talking about the same thing. However, I would argue that often we are not; because the reality of each of our lives is so different - so unique that brothers and sisters of the same family will often live their identity in starkly different ways. And here is the point - if we are unpractised in explicit dialogue about Aboriginality, and it is so diverse, so personal and surrounded by ambiguity - what hope do non-Aboriginal teachers and principals in schools have in apprehending the immense complexity and profound nature of this subject?

Cultural Literacy - slide 3 - Adventure Bay

Part of the problem is the appalling state of literacy in Australia. But I am not referring to Indigenous literacy. I am talking about the cultural literacy of our teachers. Let’s take a step back in time to 1788, when William Bligh landed at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island, just south of Hobart.

Bligh knew that the country was inhabited by Aboriginal people. He saw them and observed their villages and cultural practices. But Bligh’s views of palawa people were already based on the conclusions reached by an earlier

visitor to our country.

#### Slide 4 - Cook's declaration

This was a tipping point. This was a moment in history where Australian cultural illiteracy became embedded. It established the norm and influenced all that was to follow. If Aborigines had no rights on the land, then their culture was of little interest or relevance - there was no need to understand it and no need to understand them.

#### Slide 5 - Glover

This moment was repeated across Australia - as was the next step in the colonial project -

#### Slide 6 - Glover sans Aborigines

that of 'extirpation'. Aborigines were actively removed from the land to make way for economic development. This is, of course, a process that continues today.

#### Slide 7 - Gazette

Perhaps the most notable example recently was Howard's '10 Point Plan' to wind back Native Title and certain aspects of the Intervention that are designed to force people away from their homeland communities.

#### Slide 8 - map of tribes

Over a period of just thirty years, nearly fifty tribes across Tasmania were decimated by epidemics of introduced diseases, massacres and bounty hunting.

Slide 9 - sealers

Sealers who set up their first camp at Kents Bay on Cape Barren Island in 1797 began kidnapping and trading Aboriginal women across the north and east coasts as a source of slave labour.

Slide 10 - Amelia

In less than 25 years, the sealing industry collapsed as a result of the over exploitation. Together with the children that were born, sealers and palawa women established communities throughout the Bass Strait islands and were eventually restricted to the so called Half Caste Reserve on Cape Barren Island

Slide 10 - Oyster Cove

Other Aboriginal people still remaining on their country were promised treaties and transported first to Wybalenna on Flinders Island and then to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart.

Slide 11 - Oyster Cove photo

At the station at Oyster Cove our old people were left to die and it was hoped that this would be the end of the 'Aboriginal problem'.

Slide 12 - Handback

But this was not the end. The descendents of people from Oyster Cove and the islands did not forget their culture and the rights they held to their land. In 1995 Land Rights were won in Tasmania, resulting in Oyster Cove and finally Cape Barren Island were returned to Aboriginal control.

This is a small part of our story in Tasmania. These events have touched the

lives of every palawa family. They are at the very root of our identity. But even these basic facts are largely unknown to most educators. Without this understanding it is difficult to imagine how the identity of a Tasmanian Aboriginal child can be engaged with in a meaningful way.

So how do we address the deficit in cultural literacy amongst educators? It cannot be done solely with reference to improved history books and curriculum material - although this is an essential part of the necessary response. It must be done by engaging with Aboriginal people.

The challenge comes back to us again.

-----

What Aboriginal policy makers and educationalists assume to be important characteristics of Indigenous identity necessarily has a lot to do with their own experience of the struggles of the 60s/70s/80s. Some of this is a result of personal experience and some is constructed through political narratives and mythologies and assumptions of what constitutes a collective identity - based on a myriad assumptions about experience, attitude, influence, effect etc etc.

Slide - Quote - diversity

All this is useful in forming what is often called a 'pan-Aboriginal' identity and has been instrumental in driving the agenda for reform throughout the last few decades. But has this identity also played a role in what is widely agreed to be a widespread failure of these reforms - failure to recognize our diversity - and consequent failure to impact on education outcomes, imprisonment rates, life expectancy or economic participation?

It has become our habit to blame the system - systemic failure to empower Aborigines and to engage with culture, systemic racism and the persistence

of assimilation as the ultimate (if understated) solution to the 'Aboriginal problem' in Australia.

If we agree that recent decades have failed to significantly dent the patterns of disadvantage that characterize social and economic indicators - and therefore to shift the underlying causes of Indigenous disadvantage in this country, then we must also agree that some profound changes must occur in our approach - our thinking - in the very paradigm within which we imagine these issues reside. The cost of failure may be severe. Bob Morgan gives us as little as 10 years.

For Aboriginal people this must necessarily mean examining the veracity of each and every assumption and conclusion that we have adopted about who we are since the 1970s. We have to examine both the value and the validity of anything that we can detect as a generalization or that we accept as a characteristic of Aboriginality. But the problem here is not restricted to our reliance on anecdote and political assertion to back up our demands for action. Even the most rigorous and data driven strategy can be rendered ineffective if the wrong questions are asked.

I suspect that the major problem is that almost everything that we have incorporated into our reaction to disadvantage and our analysis of its causes has been driven by our awareness of, our experience of, and our struggle to achieve redress for the horrors that have been perpetrated on our families in the name of colonization. It is, of course, an inescapable conclusion that much of what has brought Aboriginal people to where we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a consequence (despite what Keith Windschuttle might have us believe) of the injustice that has occurred. It is also an inescapable fact (despite what John Howard might have had us believe) that racism is alive and well in Australia. If there is anyone here who doubts this, then just ask an Indigenous person at this conference over the next three days and you will find that we all have at least one personal example to share that you will have trouble ever forgetting.

What I believe is also inescapable, is that without a brave analysis of what we believe to be the truth about Aboriginality, we run a very high risk of perpetuating significant levels of disadvantage. Let me give you an example:

There is nothing more important than enlisting school principals in the urgent task of making the educational experience a successful one for Aboriginal students and communities. And there is no more powerful way to convince them of the importance of their role in this than by illustrating the challenge with data about outcomes in their state or territory - or better still - their school.

Slide 13 - graph

The picture painted by these data is an intolerable one. Its continuation cannot be justified. Or can it?

The irony is that the more we hit principals and teachers with data about the gap in literacy and numeracy, the over-representation in suspensions or the under-representation in retention - the more we hammer home a perception of Aborigines as characteristically deficient. This is a perception that fits perfectly into the racist stereotypes that every Australian is somehow inculcated with in their cultural education - that Aborigines are under-achievers, lazy, dependency prone and somehow just inferior.

The pervading influence of Social Darwinism in Western culture should not be underestimated. Australia has always had a desperate need to justify its treatment of Indigenous people. That justification is that we are 'losers'.

Slide 14 - Quote negative

The result is that in far too many schools, if there is an explicit effort at all

to focus on the needs of Aboriginal students, it is driven by a desire to wind back the deficit that these students are anticipated to have. But surely - you say - this is a necessary and pragmatic response to undeniable disadvantage. This is why we target our funding to schools with the highest Aboriginal student populations and the lowest outcomes.

Well you are right. It is a necessary response, and the approach that has been developed in the new National Indigenous Education Action Plan about to go out for negotiation mirrors this necessity.

Over the next decade, the COAG Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage agenda will focus an unprecedented and intensively targeted effort to profoundly disrupt the continuation of disadvantage that many of us here have been struggling with for over forty years. It is vitally important that we succeed. But what is even more important is that we also use this decade as an opportunity to change how we think about Aboriginal people.

The vast majority of us involved in influencing policy or implementing strategy are Baby Boomers. We have a powerful rhetoric around our cohort and a belief in the power of change and the reality of social difference. But our fluency in the significance of the Vietnam War, the toppling of Apartheid and the importance of the Beatles reflects little of the realities and needs of children growing up in the radically different (post-modern) world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Even the younger delegates here today - the Generation X-ers - are rapidly losing their relevance. Aboriginal children have little concern for the defining influences of those of you who now dominate the ranks of young academics and researchers - who's role it is to interrogate the assumptions of the past. Today's school children are not engaged by any relationship with the era of Reagan or the fall of the Berlin Wall. In fact, they are rocketing away at an accelerating rate from the world of Generation Y.

We hardly know anything about the generation that has been born since the 1990s because they have barely come into being. There is not even agreement on what they should be called. The idea of a Generation Z is a disturbing one, as it suggests that this generation will be the last.

What we do know is that these kids have never experienced a world without mobile phones, instant messaging or the internet. They populate the unprecedentedly interconnected domain of MySpace, Bluetooth and YouTube. For the youngest of them, the whole of their lives have been dominated by global terrorism, reality TV is normal and their preferred state of being is in an on-line environment.

Of course, there are far too many Aboriginal kids who live in homes that are not online, or do not have a computer. But that will change in the next five years. Regardless, there are very few Aboriginal kids who do not have access to television and the mediated reality that it provides - a reality that, apart from one or two shows like Message Stick or Living Black, does not support their cultural development as Aboriginal people.

A great proportion of Aboriginal children are today living in social settings that are not strongly influenced by Indigenous culture. Most of their parents and grandparents have been impacted to some degree by the assimilationist and integrationist policies of the last fifty years and are often not in a position to share their knowledge of culture because they have never had an 'authentic' presence of Indigenous knowledge or cultural practice in their own lives.

For too many, Aboriginality represents a relationship with victimhood and grief. This should not be surprising given our generations' interminable struggle for justice and empowerment and the repeated disappointment of successive governments which place economic imperatives above the cultural ones we identify as essential for our own survival. It is a reminder of their separation from and loss of Indigenous culture.

If Aboriginal children in our schools are not supported by strong Aboriginal cultural leaders, they may find that the available expressions of Aboriginality to be abstract and apparently irrelevant to their lives.

Without cultural support and resilience, they will have to create their own, new ways of 'being Aboriginal'.

Slide 15 - quote - being

These may be quite unfamiliar to older generations. And while these new formations of Aboriginal identity may be exciting, creative and able to exist in the emerging virtual environments of the on-line world, they may also entail a massive loss of the cultural capital that our grandparents had to fight with their lives to preserve: intimate knowledge of land and its resources, spiritual connection to place and cultural practice, the ability to continue custodial care of the land.

If the Stronger Smarter project is to succeed, we will need to work tirelessly to improve the cultural literacy of our educators - in board rooms, in lecture theatres, in schools, in communities. If the curriculum material that we produce is to be effective, if the struggle of the past 200 years is not to be wasted; we need to begin the urgent process of empowering our children. This will involve recognizing and understanding the world that they are moving into and acknowledging their right to their own ways of being Aboriginal. We need to be prepared to see the expression of Aboriginality transform as this new, almost unknowable generation begins to form the next wave of cultural and technological change in Australia.

But at the same time we must work even harder to both question our own assumptions of what Aboriginal identity is and to ensure that the things that we know are essential to our culture are clear and present in all of our work.

Slide final - Ooduroo

Our culture will change, but it cannot be allowed to fade.

Our struggle has been hard won and our legacy is too precious.

XXXXXXXXXX