

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE CROSSROADS: REPRODUCING THE PRESENT OR CHOOSING THE FUTURE?

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Over the years comparisons have been drawn between the impoverished people of Asia, Africa and South America, the so-called Third World, and Aboriginal communities, and it has been claimed by some that Aborigines live in Third World conditions and share Third World health problems. Those claims have been strongly rebutted by others, who point out that Aborigines are not nearly so badly off - they get welfare and various benefits unheard of in the Third World. These people usually add that some Aborigines even have land rights.

It is true that few Aborigines have to resort to begging for daily food, as is often the case in Third World countries where the traveller is often besieged by hungry people. Nevertheless, some remote Aboriginal communities, and it is important not to generalise, do share a fundamental Third World characteristic. They are afflicted by a Third World problem called dual development and as a consequence they are equally powerless and dispirited and ultimately share much of the poverty of the Third World.

This paper is about the problem of dual development in Aboriginal communities and the role education and training could play in solving it. In writing this paper we are drawing on experience in researching social change and living and working in Third World villages and remote Aboriginal communities.

WHAT IS DUAL DEVELOPMENT?

In the Third World dual development is characterised by a modern building, a skyscraper, next to which families live in a rubbish dump. Dual development is the big new Mercedes speeding

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down an unmade dusty road past villagers dressed in rags. It is people watching development take place around them, but having no stake in it; people seeing development change their lives while they are powerless to control or influence the changes which affect them and their children.

Dual development in the Aboriginal context refers to development which community people are not part of. There is development on one side and Aboriginal community people on the other. The developed side is the small businesses, including many community enterprises, that run on community money from lots of Aboriginal customers, often with hard-working people from outside the community making sure they are running efficiently. It is the community housing corporations that may employ a few Aboriginal people but are not under community control. The developed side also includes modern schools with hard-working, well-meaning teachers but without a community feeling of ownership. This is the modern side which, in 1988, is still outside community hands. Of course, community people take from Western society what they need - cars, video, telephone - but the development structure is not under their control.

Dual development is tremendously dispiriting for Aboriginal communities, symbolising as it does the power relationships within Australian society. It creates feelings of impotence, since there is no control over change and, in a very real sense, Aboriginal people on the undeveloped side become second-class citizens in their own communities. Ultimately control comes down to the opportunity for Aboriginal people to make choices about their future and their children's future. In many communities there are no choices to be made because no real control exists. Most Aboriginal people do not, at present, have the power to make choices about their own future - they can only watch it unfold. As in the Third World, their future is mostly in the hands of the other people.

Dual development creates enormous social problems in the Third World and will increasingly do so in Australia. In particular, it feeds a generation gap between parents and their children where older people have strong links to communities but declining authority. Their children are attracted to the developed side and the material benefits it provides, but are rarely able to share in those benefits.

It is the same in the Third World, where the generation gap and the lack of job opportunities in rural communities leads to a

flow of young people away from the countryside to the cities. Unfortunately the cities offer no solutions and in the Third World people moving from the villages usually end up living in ghettos and shanty towns in conditions of great poverty. The same trend is evident in Australia and will almost certainly accelerate in the future. It is quite likely that more of the present generation of young people in remote communities will leave their communities and come to the cities and towns, not just as temporary visitors as they do now, but on a more or less permanent basis. As in the Third World, the opportunities for these young people, who lack literacy, numeracy and other work skills, are likely to be very limited. Some will end up living in conditions not much better than those of the urban slums in the Third World.

The movement of people to the cities represents another symptom of the breakdown of Aboriginal communities, the further disintegration of communities as places where there is a sense of oneness and unity among the people who live there. This is a symptom of dual development and it represents perhaps the greatest challenge to education and training.

EXPLAINING DUAL DEVELOPMENT

In a quite normal remote community with a developed side, an Aboriginal community side, and an enormous gulf between, there have been many self-management training programs aimed at bridging these sides. Some of these training programs have led nowhere at all, to jobs which do not and will probably never exist in remote communities. But others have aimed to train community people for jobs on the developed side, in the modern school, in businesses like the store, and to help out the hard-working policemen.

Those who deliver this training always seem disappointed and surprised when their well-intentioned programs fail to capture the enthusiasm of Aborigines, and when, even after the appearance of success, some of their graduates do not perform as expected: there is an apparent lack of commitment; complaints that Aboriginal store workers lack a sense of responsibility; teachers are not in their classrooms on time. What is wrong? Where are the Aboriginal people who are eager to get training and take over these jobs and then prove they can do just as good a job as the people they replaced?

There are several current theories about why some remote Aboriginal people are less than happy about joining the developed side in their communities, and they are essentially cultural explanations - explaining Aboriginal disinterest in terms of cultural

differences. One of these theories has it that remote Aboriginal people are different from white people in that they do not learn in a purposeful way - they think learning is a kind of ritual which does not involve applying themselves to study. In other words, it is argued that because of cultural differences Aboriginal people do not understand what is required of them to join the developed side. It is the same in Third World countries. In rural Java the people on the developed side also say it is the culture of the people on the undeveloped side that gets in the way of modernisation, but they are less euphemistic when talking about this - the villagers are described as too primitive in their thinking. These theories always come from the developed side and they always see the culture of the undeveloped side as the problem.

We would argue that Aboriginal people generally understand very well what is required of them and what development is all about but, unlike those on the developed side, they also understand the costs and have good reasons to hold back. It is people on the developed side who do not understand those reasons which have absolutely nothing to do with purposeful learning, but a lot to do with the power relationships in remote communities, the ownership and control of development and the way it is put in place.

THE CONDITIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

Some communities have avoided the problem of dual development and in doing so they furnish principles for education and training to follow in other communities. We are referring to independent minded W.A. communities like Punmu, which is situated some 850 km east of Port Hedland, between the Great Sandy and Gibson deserts in Western Australia. Punmu is a community of about 250 people, mostly Manjiljarra, who were originally part of the Strelley Mob but broke away to build their own community and independent school. These people experienced the effects of dual development, with loss of culture and language and control over their own lives, and they moved further into the desert and responded to the problem in the following way.

- They did not let development undermine their traditional leadership.
- They took what they needed from white culture and society and excluded what they did not want: they did not allow development they felt they had no control over, including such Western cultural baggage as alcohol and violent videos. They put community needs above institutional ones: where they accepted white institutions

they reshaped them to make them their own - they made them Aboriginal. In the case of school, they radically changed it, incorporated it into daily life and overturned the dominance of English in the primary school. They made sure the community itself filtered and defined school knowledge. They refused to leave development to experts, and did not accept any outside view of what they should do. The Punmu people are not sitting back and watching development take place - they are controlling it. They are not being developed, they are not the object of development, but they are the initiators of it, they are doing it themselves, it is not something happening to them.

This is not to say that everything that happens at Punmu should happen elsewhere. Other communities may make entirely different decisions about the directions they take. But Punmu provides two important lessons :

- 1) Aboriginal people are capable of working in a purposeful way in building their own future. There is no problem with purposeful learning at Punmu - everything they do is for the community and to make the community strong.
- 2) Aboriginal communities will embrace development when they have a sense of control over it, when they own it. Unless Aboriginal people bring development to their side rather than having to move across to the developed side, few will participate in it. Aboriginal people need to make the developed side their own side.

These same principles must be applied to education and training, which must work towards providing community control. Without this choices are only individual ones, a means to personal advancement rather than part of a process of community development, and they will offer no advantages for community people. To achieve anything beyond transient success all training must become integral to an Aboriginal vision of community control. What is needed is for each community to construct its own framework of self-management, into which its educational and training programs can be built.

This means that education and training must look further than taking over jobs in community institutions and enterprises; it must help communities take control of those institutions and enterprises and turn them into tools for community development.

DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

There are two clear directions: education and training can attempt to reproduce the present development power structure in communities, or it can incorporate an Aboriginal vision of change. It can reproduce the present or it can open choices for the future.

Education and training which aims merely to draft Aborigines into the developed side will reproduce the present power structure and it will fail, as it has always failed. As the Miller Report makes clear, many remote Aborigines want jobs, but not mainstream jobs. Apart from obligations which preclude them from regular work, they will never be comfortable working within a power structure in which they feel no ownership, and people from outside the community will always be needed to prop the system up and keep it going, as has been happening over the past decades.

Education and training aimed at moving community people into the developed side has not solved problems in the Third World. Where it has worked at all, it has created elites which have torn communities apart as a few local people joined the developed side and quickly alienated themselves from the rest. Dual development is not necessarily based on racial differences - it is any development, whether Aboriginal or white, which has limited community support.

REPRODUCING THE PRESENT

What sort of education reproduces existing dual development?

Education that reproduces the present structure assumes that there are the same jobs in every community, in council, community enterprises, etc., and training is simply a matter of providing skills for those jobs. This education is not a two-way process, but a one-way process where the developed side teaches and the community side learns, when the developed side speaks and the community side listens. In this education the community side has to prove it is just as good as the developed side, so the focus is on one thing - getting Aborigines to the same educational standards as whites, and this is said to be equality.

This kind of education is part of dual development. It embodies the ideology of dual development in that it sees development as coming from the developed side to the underdeveloped side. In the Third World this is also called 'top down' development,

because knowledge is seen as flowing from those who have all the knowledge to those who are essentially passive recipients of it. In practice, these recipients become the victims of development.

Top down education aims to move Aboriginal people into mainstream jobs and it may succeed in putting a few Black faces in schools or community councils. But it is also about protecting the structure while changing the race of the people working within it. Therein lies the problem for Aboriginal people. They are offered education and training which captures them within the present framework, and they resist it. Unless we make it clear, through the education and training we offer, that we are doing more than this, we will never address the dual development problem, nor will we harness the enthusiasm of Aboriginal people.

The second direction, the one that offers the only chance to give Aboriginal communities real choices about their future, depends on empowering Aboriginal people to see and act on alternatives in building their own communities. This kind of education aims to do more than produce Black people who can think like whites, it aims to produce Black people who can turn whitefella institutions etc., into tools communities can own, control and use. It empowers Aboriginal people to rebuild from the bottom up, by developing enterprises which meet local needs in terms of making communities more independent and creating jobs which are culturally appropriate.

CHOOSING THE FUTURE

What are the characteristics of an education that can facilitate Aboriginal ownership of development, thereby providing choices for the future?

This education creates a community development framework where Aboriginal people have executive control, and it works within that framework in responding to community educational needs. It does not start with assumptions about what communities want, nor does it simply train for a job outside a particular community context, which is the surest way of locking people into work practices communities may want to change.

This education does not treat Aborigines as empty vessels to be filled by experts who know all about community jobs but nothing about the jobs communities may want them to do in the future. This is a two way education, not a top down one, and it treats Aborigines as equal partners in a common research effort aimed at

building a community development framework which starts in communities with community aspirations, not institutional or individual ones.

In this two way education it is useful to have a cycle of work experience and study intensives. Part of work experience involves Aboriginal students in discovering what their communities want and how those needs can be met; working from their own experience they focus on obstacles to community aspirations. During study intensives they define these problems and seek solutions that can be built at the local level. They exchange ideas with Aborigines from other communities, representatives and policy makers of government departments, and community development and educational experts who are used as consultants in this cooperative exchange of knowledge.

In this way students learn skills in critical thinking which they can apply to analyse the current circumstances of their community and its particular development needs. The leaders of Punmu are like this; they may not have literacy and numeracy skills but they are critical thinkers and they are also political thinkers.

Providing this education helps communities to establish a developmental framework which will encompass further training. Within such a framework the training of teachers, council workers, and people working in community businesses does not just take in what these jobs do now, but what communities want these jobs to do. The focus is understanding the role of community institutions and enterprises as these have been, and can be in the future; how they can be shaped and re-engineered to meet community aspirations. Trainee teachers find out what their community wants taught in school and then develop an appropriate curriculum. Workers in community enterprises learn how to work in a business which they have helped build or re-engineered to fit the cultural, economic, and other directions of their community.

This education and training is a practical means to achieving a community's aspirations in running its own affairs and establishing an economic base for the future. Most importantly, it is part of building up from the bottom to make the developed side the community side. That is the role education and training must have if Aboriginal communities are ever going to have real choices to make about their future.

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