

Anne Mahon

**Abstract**

Our dream is to see our Indigenous communities apply the same cultural values and beliefs of their “Dreamings” and place ownership into their classrooms and allow for it to carve positive relationships that will filter through solid pathways home to our wider communities.

This is a collaborative paper that will be presented by a two-way team, consisting of an Aboriginal researcher and an Anglo-Celtic Australian researcher, who work as equal partners to promote bi-cultural perspectives in their research. The team is currently working on a DEEWR funded project aimed at improving the practice of Centacare Employment and Training when delivering the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program to Indigenous students. In the team’s working relationship there is more going on than two individuals collaborating as colleagues in the work place. It is the meeting of two cultures and two histories. It is the meeting of the past interactions, knowledges and experiences of those two cultures. Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds may seem to be similar, since many of us grow up on the same lands and in the same streets. However, they are radically different, with only tenuous links between them. This paper seeks to share more than the key recommendations of our project—which reiterate the findings of similar research—and document strategies for achieving successful outcomes for Indigenous students. It seeks to explore the differences between two fundamentally disparate worlds and justify why radical strategies and approaches are necessary to reconcile our differences, in the classroom and in the broader world. We explore our bi-cultural experiences, approaches and developing understandings of our two cultures within the context of our shared desire to make our knowledges accessible to our wider communities.

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**Paper**

It was our intention to present a collaborative paper today but, unfortunately, my colleague, Eva Sahanna, cannot be here. This puts me in the unfortunate position of being a non-Aboriginal person talking about Aboriginal education and I feel that makes me one of the least qualified people to do so. This year I have been working on a DEEWR funded project for Centacare Employment and Training. The aim of the project is to improve our delivery of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy program to Indigenous people through consultation and negotiation with the local Indigenous community. What I have realised through the course of this project is that this process of negotiation is so important to the success of Indigenous programs because it leads to Indigenous ownership of their

education in the mainstream system. Indigenous people owned their education long before white people settled in Australia, however, that ownership needs to extend to partnerships within the mainstream system. Approaches to Aboriginal education need to be different from approaches to mainstream education. It is the justification for this position that I am going to talk about today. I am not advocating a different approach to Aboriginal education in the spirit of segregation and suppression. I am advocating a different approach to Aboriginal education in the spirit of a politics that values difference in the context of increasing globalisation and cultural conformity to the Western way of being. I am advocating a different approach to cater to a set of unique and complex relations between dominant mainstream Australian culture and the space of resistance occupied by Indigenous culture. The key to successful adult Indigenous education programs is Indigenous community ownership, cross-cultural understanding on the part of mainstream educators and a system that is flexible enough to cater to different educational needs.

Before I started work on this research project, I felt that there was a great deal of similarity between our two cultures. I am Anglo-Australian and I grew up in the same suburbs and on the same streets as Aboriginal people. We went to the same schools. I was aware of a history of institutional racism that has systematically disadvantaged and damaged Indigenous people since white settlement and of the impact this continues to have on the lives of Aboriginal people today. However, I think I perceived this difference as 'skin-deep' and I believed that we were the same, apart from the differences caused by the obvious disadvantages of being subject to institutional racism, which Aboriginal people are subject to and I am not. What I had not been aware of was how marked that difference is in cultural terms and in the experience of everyday life. I began to realise this when I started working with Eva on this project. We were together in our office and I was writing our appointments up in my diary when Eva commented, "Oh is that how Wadjelas do it?" I

was a little affronted and thought, “What do you mean, ‘how Wadjelas do it?’ This is just the *normal* thing to do.” Despite many years studying cultural theory and being well aware of how ideologies act on us and create our values, perceptions, beliefs and social relations, I had fallen into the trap of considering my behaviour the norm, and her behaviour, or point of view, aberrant. It was an arrogant position to take and I had to start learning to think from a completely different cultural perspective and alter my perception of the world in some quite fundamental ways, something that is not often required of middle-class Australian women with a background secure in dominant western culture. To be honest I am still not, by any means, certain that I can do this, but I am learning. Eva, in the position of cultural consultant, was kind enough to begin to educate me by sharing some of her knowledge and life experiences with me. I would like to point out that I am immensely grateful to her for sharing that knowledge, because even the sharing of knowledge is viewed differently by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. For Westerners, knowledge is generally in the public domain, it is open-ended and disputable. In Indigenous culture, knowledge is personal property and there are rules and rituals about how and when it is shared. The fact that Eva was prepared to share her knowledge with me demonstrated her commitment to improving Indigenous education by educating the educators.

No doubt for Aboriginal people the difference between our two worlds is more apparent. Eva tells me that from the Aboriginal point of view, it is obvious that non-Aboriginal people have different cultural norms. From Eva’s point of view, Wadjelas, or us non-Aboriginal people, talk differently and it is obvious we have a different way of thinking. From an Aboriginal perspective, it seems that Wadjelas have an unreasonable obsession with clock time, schedules and appointments. They do not seem share their belongings freely and they have such *small* families. What’s more, they put their elders into nursing homes, something Aboriginal people would never do. While working on this project I

came to understand that our two worlds might be best understood as parallel rather than shared, with only fragile links between them. As Stephen Harris (1990, 5) puts it “The nature and degree of difference between Aboriginal and European culture is so great that the only honest conclusion we can arrive at is that they are largely incompatible. The cultures are antithetic—consisting of more opposites than similarities. They are warring against each other at their foundations.”

The differences in culture are differences of values, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. I am not alone in my inability to perceive and comprehend differences in culture. Sometimes we can only perceive that which fits with our already received view of the world. This inability to comprehend and understand strange things was evident at the first meeting of Western and Aboriginal culture. In *The Fatal Impact*, Alan Moorehead relates that when Captain Cook sailed into Botany Bay in 1770, the Aboriginal people in the bay took little notice of the 106 feet long Endeavour. Sir Joseph Banks, the British naturalist, tells us that an Aboriginal woman on shore often looked at the ship, “but expressed neither surprise nor concern. Soon after this she lighted a fire and four canoes came in from the fishing: the people landed, hauled up their boats and began to dress their dinner, to all appearances totally unmoved by us” (Moorehead, 1968, 135). However, when the English attempted to make a landing they received a hostile reception, with the Aboriginal men defending their land from these strange invaders with spears. Nonetheless, Banks says, “the sight of the Endeavour had apparently meant nothing to these primitives because it was too strange, too monstrous, to be comprehended” (Moorehead, 1968, 135).

This same inability to comprehend new things was evident in the British reaction to the Australian landscape and its animals. The British artists of the nineteenth century created some very bizarre and certainly inaccurate representations of Australia’s fauna and flora.

John White, who was Surgeon General on Phillip's ship in the First Fleet, drew many illustrations of the plants and animals he found in New South Wales, but his picture of the kangaroo looks more like a giant rat, with a short thin tail. Perhaps, for John White, and others like him, the kangaroo was simply 'too strange and too monstrous to be comprehended.' In the same way, in early drawings of the Australian bush, artists had difficulty in representing Australian trees and, instead of drawing eucalypt trees with light showing between their leaves, drew the dense foliage of elms and oaks.

It is true that for Eva and me, our worlds are different, although it is not always just a matter of perception. When we went to our local library, we discovered our different 'perceptions' of the facilities. Eva tells me that when she takes her children to the library, the youngest usually needs to use the toilet. The library staff give her directions to the closest toilet located at the shopping centre across the major highway. Which is strange, because when I go to the library and need to use the toilet, the staff give me a key to the toilets which are located right there in the building. The fact is that our racist history continues to influence our current beliefs and attitudes, no matter how enlightened we might think we are. Even our recent efforts as a nation to redress this racist history are not so much the product of our evolving enlightenment and developing humanitarianism but the result of the forces of post-colonialism, that has created a new political space in which global populations come to be subject to the law of the global market.

The book I was quoting from earlier about the meeting of Europeans and Aboriginal people in Botany Bay is called *The Fatal Impact*. This title reflects a still current notion of European superiority and the view that all so-called primitive and savage races were doomed to extinction. This view is one that holds that savagery is sufficient explanation for the ultimate disappearance of savages from the grand theatre of world history and

justifies any measures taken to speed the process up. The Europeans linked the discourse of progress to one of inevitable extinction and in this way justified the over-riding of local Aboriginal culture, and their governing and judicial structures. This discourse of extinction remains in currency today. An eminent school principal we interviewed for this project told us that Noongar culture and Aboriginal English were but remnants of a dying culture and would fade away over time. The fact is that Aboriginal cultures have not become extinct, nor are Aboriginal people the passive victims of colonial violence and continued racist oppression.

Like any other culture, Aboriginal culture constantly changes and evolves over time. What had been a relatively stable society before white settlement has been subject to massive change and upheaval. Nonetheless, it is not the static 'noble savage' type of culture needing benevolent protection from erosive forces, both within and without. Aboriginal culture is, and has had to be, resistant to mainstream Australian culture, as a response to the complex relations of domination and resistance in a colonial nation. This resistance has extensive implications for education. Our education system is not impartial; instead, we use it to transmit our Western culture across generations. It is the implicit belief of the system that Western procedures, structures and knowledge are superior. Aboriginal people have reason to question this. European knowledge and procedures produced the myth of *terra nullis*, the infamous Aboriginal Acts and Native Welfare Acts, all of which still have far-ranging and damaging repercussions for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people may be wary and resistant to the practices of mainstream education and wonder, is this just another way of taking our culture away from us?

One of the ways in which Aboriginal people maintain their own culture and resist Western culture is through Aboriginal English. Language is a means of communication and the

carrier of culture; it is how we inherit our culture and history and how we define ourselves, as individuals and members of national and ethnic groups. The West Australian Department of Education estimates that, when Captain Cook arrived in Australia, there were two-to-three-hundred Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia. “Of these, about 70 are in severe threat of extinction and at least 80 of the surviving 90 languages will be extinct within 30-40 years” (Department of Education and Training WA, 1990, 64). As the Europe invasion impacted on Aboriginal people throughout Australia, death, displacement and the suppression of Aboriginal languages meant that the Creole languages developed to communicate with the Europeans developed into Aboriginal English. Aboriginal English then became the means of communication, not just with Europeans, but between Aboriginal peoples themselves. These days, Aboriginal English functions as more than a variation and redefinition of Australian English; it is the vernacular of resistance. Aboriginal English speakers use the dialect to resist the assimilating practices of dominant Anglo-Australian culture, and have used it to maintain and sustain Aboriginal culture through long periods of violent suppressions. Aboriginal English is a unique, rich and expressive dialect of English that has its own grammar, semantics and pragmatics.

Historically, the Australian education system has been active in suppressing Aboriginal language and culture. For a long time, Aboriginal children were refused access to our schools. When Aboriginal children were able to gain access to schooling, the use of their own language was a punishable offence. In the same way, the use of Aboriginal English has been punished and discouraged in the Australian education system and has been perceived as a devolved form of English rather than a dialect in its own right. Historically, the education system’s reception of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English has alienated students. The refusal to recognise a language is a refusal to recognise Aboriginal peoples’ identity and culture. In addition, the suppression of Aboriginal English has

disadvantaged Aboriginal students by not providing explicit language instruction and thereby reducing their opportunities for success in both the education system and beyond. Indeed, Aboriginal children may have to do more than twice the learning expected of a non-Aboriginal child. Without explicit support from the system, they have to learn how to behave in a different culture and learn a different language before they can begin to learn the curriculum content. While recent years have seen a great leap in understanding of the deficits of the education system and a concurrent surge of initiatives and programs to address these deficits, there remains a legacy of suspicion and distrust. For adult education students, this legacy is often not some half-forgotten and regrettable period of history, but a recent and alienating memory of their school years. It may be that they are seeing the same process of estrangement at work on their children. Despite this relatively recent recognition of the disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal people in mainstream education, we still need to devise a workable solution to offering education to Aboriginal people that does not offer an education in cultural assimilation.

Within educational discourse there is a pervasive notion that Aboriginal people should change to suit existing education systems, rather than educational systems changing to suit them. Aboriginal people want access to Western education and the empowerment that education provides, but not at the expense of their culture. One of the ways in which Aboriginal culture resists the processes of assimilation is by the concept of the 'coconut.' In Aboriginal parlance, anyone who uses 'flash talk' and takes on Western behaviours is liable to be called a 'coconut;' black on the outside, white on the inside. Eva tells me that this is because in Aboriginal culture you do not want to stand out from the group. I also see it as part of that culture of resistance, where the notion of the coconut constitutes part of the social mechanisms used to maintain an identity separate from the dominant culture. For Aboriginal people then, this is another issue to be negotiating when getting a Western

education; it is not simply a matter of absorbing and understanding but always being critically aware of how the use of that knowledge of Western ways and culture might affect their own culture.

Adult literacy programs seek to empower their students and see education as the pathway to such things as greater participation in the community, qualifications, personal development, further training and employment. However, to offer empowerment to Indigenous people without the cultural baggage that comes with it is difficult.

Commentators suggest that the only way to go about this is to negotiate the provision of education with Aboriginal people and their communities. When we started this project, one of our concerns was the low retention rates of Indigenous students at our Language Literacy and Numeracy classes. However, we have learnt that getting better outcomes in Indigenous education is more than a matter of improving attendance and participation. As Boughton (1998, 7) argues, it is not Aboriginal non-participation in mainstream VET and labour markets that is the problem, creating a need for strategies to remove barriers to participation. Rather, it is the mainstream that is the problem and the fact that Indigenous people are not participating is a measure of the system's lack of relevance to Indigenous development needs and aspirations. What our education system needs to do is to change the delivery, focus and aims of its education programs.

It seems the only way to do this is to negotiate with Aboriginal people themselves.

Genuine Aboriginal education only happens when Aboriginal people have real power over the education process. Aboriginal decision-making in the education process is the best insurance against providing education that is a tool of assimilation. Current research on what constitutes good practice in Indigenous education advocates training that is demand responsive rather than supply driven. Therefore, in an ideal world, the education provider

would negotiate all aspects of training with students and their community. Negotiation involves more than consultation – it means involving Indigenous people in developing programs that they will want to participate in and ensuring that the outcomes align with their aspirations. It is likely that the participants seek outcomes that will be broader than employment and may include things such as health and wellbeing, driver education, the arts, and personal empowerment. In this way, Indigenous education can be conceived of as not so much a transmission of knowledge but a negotiation of knowledges.

When negotiating curriculum content I think that you will find that the outcomes will be practical and directly related to people's immediate and everyday life. Western learning tends towards the theoretical model of learning, where we learn a broad range of theories and skills that we then apply to a range of situations. However, Aboriginal learning and knowledge is more typically bound to specific situations and occasions rather than theory.

Harris (1990, 32) gives the example of spear throwing, where the

use of a woomera indicates a knowledge of leverage. The selection of different designs of spears for different tasks indicates a knowledge of the fact that forces equals mass times acceleration, and the relationship between angles of trajectory and distance and so on. But these physical principles are not articulated as such and are not freed up to be applied to all conceivable situations.

In the Aboriginal culture of learning, there are no hypotheticals. Harris (1990, 31) attributes this to a difference in Aboriginal and Western world-views. He describes Aboriginal society as a 'closed' system, "where there is a greater degree of organic conformity than typically exists in Western society". In a closed system, the world order is established and not changeable. The position of individuals and their relationships to each other within that world order is not subject to change. This is in contrast to contemporary Western society's open system of social organisation, based on the notion of the

individual's intrinsic independence from other individuals. Our system is characterised by the wide range of choices allowed the individual in their actions and social relations; choices that are not based on the family, the church, nor any other collective unit. The Western organisation of society may seem more 'natural' but it is not; it is the result of the need of capitalist society to have flexible social structure in which each individual constitutes a flexible and mobile unit of labour and consumption. In the Western system, the individual needs to have a broad range and flexible range of knowledge to cater for a multiple social opportunities, but in the Aboriginal system, the individual requires knowledge applicable only to their particular position in and relation to the social fabric.

These two different worldviews affect the way we go about learning and the sort of outcomes we perceive as valuable. In the course of our research project, we offered a series of 'computer classes' to a group of Aboriginal people who had told us that they wanted to learn about computers. However, it was the non-Aboriginal people involved in the project did most of the learning. What we learnt about was this different culture of learning. I think what we expected was a showcase model of Western learning in which our students would receive instruction about how to use computers and computer programs. Instead, some of our 'students' would come to the 'class' with very specific tasks that they wanted to complete using a computer that related to their immediate needs. For example, a couple of people would come because they needed to write a particular letter, and someone else would come because they wanted to design a T-shirt logo. What they did not do was come to learn generic word processing skills. In fact, if there was not a need to complete a particular task in their everyday life, then these students did not come at all at the appointed time and by the same logic, if a need arose outside of designated class time they would come along to class anyway. Another thing that was interesting about those classes and different ways of learning was that one motivation for attending had nothing to do with

‘learning’ as I view it, but instead was motivated by providing social support. Maintaining personal relationships is extremely important to Aboriginal people and in this way, people would come along to support others in their social network who were involved in the project. For these people just attending was the important factor and that attendance was in no way related to the reception of knowledge. Participation was significant and represented an outcome in itself because it supported the social fabric and cemented family ties.

Therefore, I think, for Westerners, the most difficult aspect of the negotiation process is recognising and understanding cultural difference. This understanding is sometimes hampered by the fact that we use the same terms for similar structures, but those same terms mean quite different things. Take the term family; in Aboriginal culture, the word family represents a different concept than it does in mainstream Australian culture. I was recently at a seminar on two-way education where the presenters were describing how the Aboriginal conception of family is different from the Western conception of family. The presenters gave a comparison by way of family trees; the Aboriginal presenter showed her family, which numbered over three hundred people and the Non-Aboriginal presenter showed her family tree, which numbered less than twenty. In the break, I was talking to another non-Aboriginal woman and she was a little perplexed. She said to me that she did not see how our conceptions of family were different. After all, she was a grandmother and had a big family. Mick Dodson describes the difference this way; in Aboriginal society, he tells us, “the extended family or kinship system traditionally managed virtually all areas of social, economic and cultural life. . . The family was, to speak comparatively, the legislative assembly, the court system, and the agency for service delivery.” What it means is that the family in Aboriginal society has the same power that we Westerners attribute to the government and lawmakers. In this way, the social consequences of failing to meet a

family obligation are more severe in Aboriginal society than in Western society. Failing to meet a family obligation is comparable to a Westerner's refusal to pay a parking fine, or a speeding ticket. We may choose to break the law but we cannot refuse the consequences, which may involve a losing your licence, a court appearance and perhaps jail. For Aboriginal people this difference in the conception of family has a greater effect on their lives than confusion about the how the term "family" is meant, because it means that they are subject to the laws and consequences of not one but two judicial systems.

The need for Aboriginal people to live in two cultural worlds is more pressing than it is for middle-class Anglo-Australians like me. While working on this project, I have been lucky to have the opportunity to learn a little more about a different way of thinking about the world. I would like to see this kind of learning made more accessible to other adult educators. In conclusion then, while the key to successful Indigenous education programs is negotiation, which in turn leads to Indigenous community ownership and participation, and the provision of outcomes that are aligned to the aspirations of Indigenous people, what is needed is more cross-cultural education for the educators. For the existing education system to be flexible enough to cater to the needs of Indigenous learners, we need educators and administrators who can respond to these needs with knowledge of and sensitivity to the very real differences between our two cultures.

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## Anne Mahon

Abstract Title

***Deadly Dreaming: Bi-cultural strategies for working with Indigenous Adults in Education***

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### **Biography**

Anne Mahon is an Anglo-Celtic Australian from Perth, Western Australia. She works as a teacher with Centacare Employment and Training's (CET) Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) and as a researcher in a two-way team with Eva Sahanna on CET's DEEWR funded Indigenous LLNP Project. She has a background in communication and cultural studies and an enduring interest in the intersections between adult literacy and cultural theory.

Eva Sahanna married a Bardi man, has Bardi children and is a Nyungar York. She is from the South-West region of Western Australia. Her place of importance and significance is the sacred area of Wave Rock where the Waagyl (big snake) came through and shaped the land before finding a resting place deep in the south end of WA. Eva has worked as a research officer on numerous educational publications and academic papers as part of a team with Centre for Applied Language Literacy Research and with the Department of Education WA. Eva is now employed as an Indigenous Consultant and Co-researcher and works in a two-way team with Anne Mahon on Centacare Employment and Training's DEEWR funded Indigenous Language Literacy & Numeracy Program Project.

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