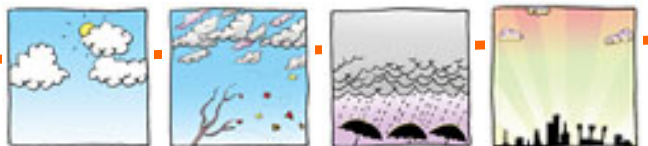


four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

Adult Literacy Conference ■ Melbourne ■ September 10-11, 2004



Community literacy - taking charge of the journey ahead using innovative skills based learning

Linking the networks; chaining the learning.

Noelene Milliken

I would like to explain the title of this paper and share with you its significance for me. As a teacher, who has for many years been involved in special education, I have found the forward and backward chaining of new learning a useful teaching and learning strategy. It is my belief that when strong learning links are made the educational chain grows and becomes secure and reliable for future learning and development. In my own search for understanding of how Aboriginal students learn I have found it necessary to discover the links with the past, the present and then hopefully by working with other educators, together we will be able to create new, strong links for the future.

From my reading and research one of the most telling images that helped shape my own understanding of underpinning issues that impact on Aboriginal learning in the future was a photograph of proud, strong Aboriginal men from central Australia chained together for daring to defy the authorities and practise their culture (BOS Aboriginal English, 1995 pg 9). They were chained, denied their cultural freedom and physically beaten but their spirit would not be beaten and was clearly evident as they gazed defiantly into the lens of the camera.

It is that spirit that is being kept alive by Aboriginal people today as they speak out for better approaches to education and training for themselves and their future generations. Recent research shows (Beresford et al 2003; Sutherland 2003) that local community links are essential to the success of Aboriginal education programs and I would like to draw on some of that research now to discuss why Community Learning Centres need to become one of the links in Aboriginal education.

Quentin Beresford in his paper: ***The Context of Aboriginal Education*** (Beresford and Partington pg 20) lists the key initiatives from the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2000) commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. The initiatives are as follows:

- Getting students to school regularly
- Addressing health issues
- Providing incentives to stay on in school through workplace training
- Building stronger partnerships with Indigenous communities
- Skilling parents
- Providing better educational support for students
- Developing quality teaching

Beresford is of the opinion that the current State policies with their 'divided responsibilities' is not 'providing an ideal framework for Aboriginal education' (pg21) and goes on to say that there is 'a lack of understanding of the depth and complexity of the problems' (pg 23) associated with Aboriginal education. Sutherland (2003) advocates major changes and a 'new way of doing business' that totally integrates all service providers in a culturally appropriate way in a school setting. Community education programs such as the one my co- presenters, Ros Bauer and Grace Coe will tell you about have a very real contribution to make to our local educational success with our Aboriginal students and go a long way to addressing the seven initiatives listed above.

Community programs, which are run at community centres, can provide a positive and productive learning environment and can help overcome the entrenched racism in its many guises - historical expectations, verbal harassment, stereotyping, conflict with peers, uniform disputes with teachers, missing notes - which Aboriginal students experience in schools. As Watts (1978) said "Education should be a constructive process, building on what a [student] is and developing [their] natural potential, not destroying and denying [their] birthright" (cited in Beresford and Partington '**Separate and Unequal**' pg64). Community Learning Centres can make this constructive approach a reality as the participants are meeting in a culturally friendly atmosphere where they hear their own language (Aboriginal English) and are encouraged to achieve in a way that is acceptable to their own and their families' beliefs and values.

We are reminded by Beresford that a 'holistic approach to the issues of Aboriginal education' (pg67) is needed. What better way to provide that holistic approach than to link all the stake holders - families, schools, TAFE, community groups such as CDEP, Elders, Land Council, other incorporated groups, DEST, Community Health, local university, local chamber of commerce, local council. The list is endless. The links may not join all at the one time but networks will be developed so that the connections can be made when they are appropriate. Links with the past must also be made. We cannot 'separate current issues and problems in Aboriginal education from the past' (Beresford pg 68) and if we try we will continue to fail.

The **"Whitefella School"** (Folds, 1987) system has failed and continues to fail many Aboriginal students. It is the cultural expectation of a NSW classroom that children will sit still and listen. They will answer questions when asked. They will take their turn when appropriate. They will sit in the seats until told to move. They will work individually unless given some 'special project' group activity. Mathematics, spelling and tables are individual pursuits that are rewarded for individual success and achievement and one must never copy from one's neighbour. Classrooms are set up so that all children in the room are roughly the same age - five year olds together, six year olds and so on. All of these aspects of schooling do not sit well with many Aboriginal students (Hughes, 1988). Simms et al in their paper **"Aboriginal Families and the School System"** (Beresford and Partington pg 69) highlight the vast difference in expectations placed upon Aboriginal children. Lawton (1996, cited in Simms) says: "In Aboriginal society children are not excluded from, nor protected from, the outside world. Instead, they participate in the world alongside adult members of their community". (pg 75) [As Friere would tell us it is as important to learn to read the world as it is to read the word (Freire, 1970).] Simms goes on to say that 'whilst children learn through observation of adults, they are also expected to take on responsibilities themselves' (pg 75) and that they do not necessarily wait to be told what to do. In our present day rush to get male role models into NSW schools we might pause to consider that it is the responsibility of the women in Aboriginal society to pass on Aboriginal values to the children (Simms pg 79). Are we heading for yet another educational failure as our governments seek to address a perceived educational need? But that is an issue for another time.

Another significant educational issue that can be addressed in Community Learning Centres is that of language. Malcolm et al in their paper **"Language in the Classroom Setting"** (Beresford et al pg92) points out that school language is at odds with the home language of Aboriginal students. The dialect of English that most rural urban Aboriginal people speak is recognised as Aboriginal English. Recognised but not accommodated in the most part. Students who attend NSW classrooms are expected to communicate in the dominant language of the society - Standard Australian English. They are expected to participate in discussions in a language with which they do not feel comfortable, to conform to a structure that is not culturally appropriate - answering questions on demand denies the Aboriginal cultural value of choosing whether to answer a question or not - and to contribute in a way that has rules and regulations with which they are not familiar. One only has to read Dianne Eades paper: Language and the law: White Australia Vs Nancy (Watson et al 1993) to see how cultural language differences between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English, can have such devastating consequences. One would also be wise to read Eades "Aboriginal English" (1995) for a clear concise overview on how to really accommodate Aboriginal English and culture into our classrooms. As Elder Aunty Ruby Langford Ginibi says: "Aboriginal English is telling how it is. Aboriginal English is our voice, the way we talk." (BOS 1995, The Way We Learn, pg 15)

Over several years I have had the pleasure of working with a group of Aboriginal Elders in the Wagga Wagga community and I have been 'taught' the rules and regulations and the enormous value of 'yarning-up'. If our classrooms were to take this approach to news

and show and tell what a fun time would be had by all! No doubt there are little voices saying to you: We don't have time to sit and talk. Well my little voice says: We don't have time to perpetuate failure either. Learning has to be made accessible to all our students and yarning with our Aboriginal students is one of the tools we need to use.

Aboriginal English brings to our classrooms a richness of a linguistic system that has its links with a shared common past. If we listen to the inflections and nuances we can hear the lilting speech rhythms of Aboriginal ancestors and if we focus on the pronunciation we can hear the voices of the Irish, the Cockneys, Dutch, German and our closest northern neighbours. The syntax and grammar of Aboriginal English provides a rich tapestry of language that has evolved from Aboriginal ingenuity and spirit as they grapple with the complexities of English in order to survive. Eileen Kampakuta Brown, an Elder from Coober Pedy, sums up her opinion of Standard English when she says: "We got no English but we still talking. Never mind that I don't speak English. I talk properly, talk straight. This head here got it all. I've got the knowledge. Never mind no English, don't down talk, up talk, around-the-bend talk. We talking about our Manta [Earth] all the time. I speak strong." (McConchie pg 12) If teachers want to survive and teach appropriately in Aboriginal education then they need to 'speak strong' and avail themselves of the **ABC** approach recommended by Simms (Beresford and Partington pg108) - **Accept** Aboriginal English, **Build Bridges** to standard English and **Cultivate** Aboriginal ways of approaching experience and knowledge. If we want to be seen as leaders in our educational fields then we "must believe in the potentialities of the people" (Freire, 1974 pg 137) with whom we work. Our Aboriginal students have much to teach us.

Finally I would like to share with you another image and I thank my primary school teacher, Mr Williams, from West Albury Primary School Upper Division for his wonderful teaching all those many years ago. There is another reason why I see linking as an essential underpinning component for successful Aboriginal education programs and that thinking is inspired by the following lines of one of Will Ogilvie's poems that I learned in primary school:

*Hurrah for the storm clouds breaking
Hurrah for the driving rain
The dull earth out of her sleeping
Is woken to life again
There are mirrors of crystal shining
Wherever the cloud wrack breaks
And grass glad banks are twining
A wreath for the fairy lakes
Lakes that are linked in an endless chain
For the waters are out in the swamps again.*

Coming from drought stricken NSW I can't wait to see the drought really break and the swamps full again. But it is the drought in Aboriginal education where I believe it is time to really change our approaches so that the overall learning environment - outcomes, curriculum, assessment, National Reporting Scales - (which for me are 'dull earth') can be awakened and allow new growth to occur. We need the storm to break. We need the endless lakes of wisdom and knowledge that are out there to be linked together to provide better formats to educate our Aboriginal students and we need them to go on being linked for many years to come. We need to evaluate our programs in a more culturally appropriate way. Treating all students the same is not equitable. To my mind there is 'nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals' (source unknown). The magic of learning needs to reflect the clarity of the waters from which we ask our students to drink. Another quote that comes to mind is from the mid 1800s: "When students learn from a teacher who is themselves engaged in learning then they drink

from a running stream. When they are taught by a teacher who thinks they know all that there is to know then they, the students, drink the waters of a stagnant pool."

When we as educators learn about, understand and allow for the heavy load of the past that our Aboriginal students bring with them to the learning environment perhaps we too will cheer for the storm clouds breaking and our students will not be expected to drink from the waters of a 'stagnant pool'. As Mandawuy Yunupingu exorts us *"learn from us, as we have had to learn from you."* (McConchie pg vi) and McConchie reminds us: *"the wisdom that Australian Indigenous leaders have to tell us has never been more relevant to us all than it is today"*(pg111). As educators in this unique arena we must connect with, and learn from our Aboriginal community so as to forge strong links and what better way to do that than to involve the whole community in Community Learning Centres.

Forging the Links

Ros Bauer

Work Skills Certificate I is designed for "...learners who are disadvantaged in the current labour market i.e. are unemployed or needing to update skills to enter, remain in or return to the work-force. These learners require support and adjustment to the learning program so that they will develop the generic and vocational skills and confidence needed to:

- participate in training
- gain entry-level training
- have access to a career path/further training.

The course is also designed to assist groups who are under represented in education and employment to enter or re-enter the workforce.

The vocational electives include entry-level modules as well as modules with outcomes at higher than entry level....The course provides a range of vocational skills not easily found in other courses. The need for this course was identified as a mean of satisfying the requirement for programs attracting specific funding" (NSW TAFE Commission 2001).

The course was funded and developed by the Indigenous Education Unit after consultation with the Tolland Aboriginal Corporation (TAC), for the Tolland community. On visiting the Centre to brief prospective students, a request was made by the group and TAC to hold the course at the Neighbourhood Centre. So by default, my first involvement with community literacy and community capacity building was set in motion.

Students were enrolled in a variety of modules according to their needs and vocational goals from a facilitator's point of view; but more importantly, what was seen to be engaging, from the student's point of view. This is concomitant with informal learning practices i.e. it is not goal centred, it is the success of the experience which is important, which in turn directs the learning. Logistically, having students enrolled in so many different modules does appear to be a co-ordinator's nightmare. But having so much involvement with the program's inception and production, most of what students were doing was not difficult for me to follow in terms of who was where and when; and who needed to be assessed in what modules and how could this be done without imposing upon the learning. Remember, we were "unboxing" or "decompartmentalising" the learning structures, a system which previously has not served Aboriginal learning styles well, so it was bound to have certain inherent complexities. A "one size fits all" educational model is a notion of the past.

For example: on Monday, eleven of the men would travel by bus to the Horticulture section of TAFE at North Wagga to complete a *Small Motors* module. At the same time, one lad was at work experience at the local nursery supplies and four women completed individual projects. One was learning how to keep petty cash records and write up conference notes for her role as treasurer for the local Aboriginal Medical Association. Another was preparing material in order to market her small home-based craft enterprise.

On Tuesday, the *Small Motors* group would complete literacy and numeracy activities appropriate to their practical module, another student was on work experiences and four others were enrolled in the *Preparation for Driver's Licence* module and so on. On Wednesday, all students came together for a session on the module *Social and Work Environment*. One afternoon of the week, we all travelled by bus to the TAFE campus to develop literacy skills through the use of technology. Art was also a main cultural component of the course, as were several cultural excursions. The most favourite being a trip to Narrandera to look for didjs with a local Elder and eat witchetty grubs.

I would like to take a moment to briefly discuss two of the course components. The art "class" was facilitated by a local Aboriginal man who was originally from Goodooga country in northern New South Wales. And, as Wagga is largely a resettled community (this being reflected in the cultural make up of the student group) there weren't any restrictions in place on specific art forms or stories. Students were given the artistic and cultural freedom to explore their identity in a capacity only limited by their own imaginations. On a sub-conscious level, I think this defined the essence of Aboriginal *cultures*.

At the end of the semester, the Corporation held an art show in conjunction with the students. Together, they were responsible for cleaning and decorating the main art arena, hanging the art, designing the publicity brochures and being present on the night to meet and greet the guests. From the information the students willingly gave me, I was able to develop a program for the exhibition that included a profile on each of the artists. The Aboriginal Unit once again, generously assisted with the provision of nibbles and drinks.

Secondly, I believe the inclusion of the module *Social and Work Environment* imperative. This module prepares students for the reality of what it is really like in the "white fella" work environment and how this is often at odds with the individual's social and cultural environment. The facilitator of this module, my colleague and co-author Noelene Milliken – managed to weave the dynamics of culture into the module in a way that helped students understand that they could retain their culture but still manipulate a work environment that enabled them to meet the expectations of "white fella" ways. For example; as teachers we showed respect and value for Aboriginal cultures in various ways

- Timetables existed for us, not them. If a student was late, we acknowledged that late was a cultural concept of ours, not theirs, and they were given a warm welcome instead of an admonishment. Family business comes before TAFE business and we showed our understanding of this value.
- Aboriginal English was welcomed and encouraged, not merely accepted. This included its written form, its oral form, its nuances and its how it encapsulates /captures/defines their view of the world/world view. An example of this as written text is best expressed in the student's narrative of cultural events, such as the afore-mentioned Narrandera field trip.

In contrast, students were made aware of the appropriateness and place of "white fella" verbal and written text in any potential work environment. For example they developed skills in:

- Completing a *sign on* and *sign off* document for any job of their choice. They were required to fill in their personal details, complete the numeric information in 24 hour time and calculate their weekly earnings.
- Developing and maintaining a petty cash system which included the retention of all dockets and receipts, recording details and places of purchases, balancing books and preparing financial reports.

Noelene's role as facilitator of *Social and Work Environment* was instrumental in showing the students that they could be successful in participating in a life in the broader community whilst still retaining their cultural identity. Going to work is a role we all have to play. It is a time to 'paint up' and join in the dance.

Strengthening the Links - an interview with Tolland Aboriginal Corporation members and students from the work skills group.

Tolland is a suburb of Wagga Wagga which is bereft of many of the facilities and services that are instrumental in improving the standards of living and reduce unlawful practices, which we believe other suburbs enjoy. According to the 2004 Wagga Wagga City Council Social Plan, 70% of Wagga's Indigenous community reside in Tolland, a suburb which also displays the following characteristics:

1. Predominantly public housing with single parent families
2. High Unemployment
3. High domestic violence rates
4. 30% of population under 14years of age
5. High truancy rates
6. Income levels lower than the state average
7. Limited and expensive public transport
8. Higher rates of crime committed by young children than in other suburbs
9. Drug and alcohol dependency

A committee of 15 Aboriginal community people, who were concerned about the lack of services and opportunities in Tolland which they believed exacerbated/perpetuated the above characteristics and behaviours, would meet in a local park to discuss these issues, along with the racism that existed between residents. The adjoining Neighbourhood Centre, owned by the Department of Housing, eventually became available for lease. After some discussions with the Department's Project Officer, they became lessees of the building and formed the Tolland Aboriginal Corporation (TAC) in May 2003. Their aims were to address some of these issues in a way that involved the whole community and promoted reconciliation. They wanted to provide alternatives for youth with "nothing to do", beautify the area, address alcohol abuse and reconnect parents with children exhibiting difficult/unlawful/antisocial/unacceptable behaviours.

From an Aboriginal community perspective, the Corporation sees the success of the Work Skills course as hinging on the premise that Aboriginal people learn better with their own mob and when educational facilities are accessible physically and "cognitively" being available on their own patch.

In the first instance, the success of Work Skills seems apparent in terms of student retention and outcomes. However, the links and future literacy initiatives that have taken place since the course become more apparent in the writing of this article. Subsequent programs have included a Statement of Attainment in Foundation and Vocational Education, Aboriginal Tutor Training, Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and Certificate I in Foundation and Vocational Education.

The Corporation have been successful in securing small local grants for the purchase of audio-visual equipment, conduct a Christmas in July for needy people in the community and have run several school holiday programs. In April of this year, the TAFE mentored the Corporation in writing a grant for the Aboriginal Youth Initiatives Crime Prevention Project, funded by the Attorney General's Department. They have just received notification that \$30,000 has been awarded for their submission entitled "*Making Tracks - Reconnecting Learning and Cultural Identity - An Holistic Approach*". Facets of this program include driver education, men's business, women's business, activities that develop lateral thinking and problem solving, an introductory course to TAFE, and a mural for the Centre. All of these activities will be woven together by a series of workshops which include identity, substance abuse, racism, opportunities for the future and so on. TAFE will continue their involvement for the duration of the program, in a variety of ways that will help develop the Corporation's community literacy profile.

The current course at the Centre includes several horticulture modules and the Department of Housing have provided funding to landscape and beautify the grounds. In addition, preliminary discussions are underway between TAFE, TAC, NSW Department of Education and three local schools, with the goal of establishing a domain link school at the Centre in the future.

In our present group we have a 14-year-old girl who has been experiencing difficulties in the school system for some years. Her mother describes her as a shy girl who takes racism to heart. She is protective of her younger sister and in the past has retaliated physically to racial threats made upon her sister. This has resulted in several suspensions, an inability to cope with the social environment of school and not being able to reconnect with an already alien learning culture upon her return. This cycle has carried through to high school. The results are that she is behind her peers in skills level, is emotional, has poor self-esteem and suffers from depression. She enjoys being part of the Tolland class because she feels a part of the teaching and learning cycle and is able to give back something to her class-mates and by her own admission is more willing to learn. This student has dual enrolment with school and TAFE and without depersonalising her situation, is a case study in point for the establishment of the domain school.

Some noteworthy achievements of community members include:

Sarah – Holder of a Certificate II in Paint and Panel. She is currently completing her Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and has been successful in working with the Aboriginal Unit to package a mini course (one week) in Introductory Spray Painting for local Aboriginal students. Sarah will teach on the program. She has also applied to participate in the Koori Admission Program (KAP) offered by Charles Sturt University at the end of this year, with a view to beginning teacher training in 2005.

Wayne – Currently completing Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and his Tertiary Preparation Certificate. Wayne has also applied to attend the KAP this year for university teacher training next year.

Theresa & Jenny – Both are TAC members who have completed a Certificate IV in Small Business Management course. Theresa has almost completed Certificate II in Business Administration and is hoping to study at law at Tranbie next year, so that she can advocate for Aboriginal people in the legal system. Both are enrolled in Certificate IV Assessment and Workplace Training.

Several of the former and present students enrolled in courses at the Neighbourhood Centre were asked their opinions on why they believe the community literacy courses have been successful. The following is a summary of their responses:

1. They like to learn with other Aboriginal people because they are all friends, they can have a laugh, they know what *you're going on about* and they learn from each other.
2. They like to be at the Neighbourhood Centre because they enjoy the relaxed atmosphere, it is better being around community people, there are a variety of age groups, they can learn from the older people, has a more comfortable learning *space* and is less threatening than the main campus.
3. They feel a good teacher is one who respects them, takes the time to listen, and doesn't put them down. Someone who gives them confidence, is a skilled facilitator, understands Koori culture, understands them, is not too strict, explains things properly, knows what they're talking about, has a sense of humour, has patience; and someone who teaches them to *do* something, instead of *telling* them to do something.

4. All replied that they given more confidence by doing the course, particularly in the area of job seeking. One young lad said getting his certificate was "slick" and that it was hanging on the wall in his room.

Conclusion - A three chain lift.

Noelene Milliken and Ros Bauer

So, what went right? We are limited by space in this paper to fully explore every imperative of the work discussed thus far, and our apologies must go the Aboriginal people in trying to compress the dynamics and intricacies of their most ancient culture, to the confines of this text. However, we believe by basing community literacy in the lived experiences of the Aboriginal participants; and superimposing the teaching and learning experience on a set of values that they hold, and for which we have shown respect, has led to the shared successes which have brought us here, together today.

As tutorial support teachers assisting vocational students and colleagues, we have the pleasure of working in many vocational areas. One particular concept that Noelene has had to grapple with was a two chain lift. It seems that for the lift to be done safely and competently it has to happen in such a way that both chains remain taut and the weight of the load evenly distributed. It requires skilled concentration on the part of all people involved. So it is with Aboriginal education. But in this particular field of education for the learning to be effective it requires a three chain lift; a lift that embraces the body, the mind and the spirit. It requires the input of community, service providers and participants and as Sutherland (2003) says it must be based on 'trust, norms and networks that help facilitate co-ordinated action' and when this happens we will begin to link together the social capital that will build and sustain a real learning community that meets the needs of Aboriginal students.

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