LEARNING, EARNING AND YEARNING: DISRUPTION, INNOVATION AND EXPANSION IN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

'What for, I do this?' asks an Aboriginal young man who has just become the first in his community to finish high school. Rather than celebrating his achievement, he felt the need to ask one of the most profound questions in education – what for or why? This particular story, discovered during the course of my PhD research, leads to an even larger question: How do we personalise education?

The question seems a mile away from the perennial debate in education – 'back to basics' versus an expansive education agenda. Conservatives in the 'back to basics' corner rightly point out that proficiency in literacy and numeracy is fundamental to successful economic and social participation later in life, while progressives in the expansion corner justifiably point to the need for all learners to become producers and not mere consumers of learning, by learning to learn, by thinking critically and creatively, by developing self-identity and expression, and by becoming more entrepreneurial and culturally engaged in a globalised world.

A new paradigm that synthesises these forces is necessary, if not urgent. This presentation proposes such a paradigm by drawing upon national and international theory, data and literature calling for greater disruption, innovation and expansion in education; by gifting Indigenous young people with educational experiences that go to relevance, context and 'place', identity and character, agency and enterprise, aspiration, culture and a sense of learning, earning and yearning.

Tony Dreise

Australian Council for Educational Research

Tony Dreise descends from the Guumilroi people of north-west New South Wales and south-west Queensland. He is currently a Principal Research Fellow, Indigenous Education, at ACER. He is in the final stage of a PhD at the Australian National University, where he has been researching the relationship between Australian philanthropy and Indigenous education. He holds a Bachelor of Teaching degree and was one of the inaugural graduates of the Executive Masters of Public Administration with the Australian and New Zealand School of Government.

Tony has over 20 years high-level experience in public policy, research and education, having served as a Research Officer with Queensland's Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council; National Equity Manager with the Australian National Training Authority; National Executive Officer of Australia's Indigenous Training Advisory Council; Principal Education Officer within the NSW Education Department; Executive Director of Indigenous Policy in the Queensland Government; and Social Inclusion Director with TAFE NSW North Coast Institute.

Tony has served on a number of regional and national boards, including as a former President of the Northern Rivers Social Development Council; former Deputy Chair of the Northern Rivers Board of Regional Development Australia; and former Member of the National Vocational Equity Advisory Council. He currently sits on the Board of Adult Learning Australia.

If you were asked to score the nation's performance in providing education to Indigenous Australians, what would you give it? You would most probably come up with a report card with mixed results. When one looks at performance by educational sector, it could be argued (hypothetically) that vocational education and training (VET) should score a 'B', schools a 'C' and universities a 'D'.

Data show that Indigenous participation in VET increased by 48 per cent between 2002 and 2011. Further, Indigenous Australians made up 3 per cent of all apprentices and trainees in 2011, which is slightly higher than the Indigenous share of the general population at 2.5 per cent (National VET Equity Advisory Council [NVEAC], 2013). Meanwhile, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student retention to Year 12 has reduced from 37 percentage points to 28 percentage points over the past decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, March 2014). At the university level, approximately 10 000 Indigenous people were enrolled across Australian universities in 2009. While this figure might look impressive, it actually means that Indigenous Australians make up a mere 0.7 per cent of university enrolments despite comprising approximately 2.5 per cent of the Australian population (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011).

Encouragingly, participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education has come a long way since the days when Indigenous people were actively excluded from attending schools (Broome, 2010). Today, young Indigenous Australians can look up to and hopefully be inspired by Indigenous doctors, professors, teachers, nurses and qualified tradespeople. However, recent data also show that the Year 12 retention rate for Indigenous students in 2013 sat at 55 per cent, compared with 83 per cent for their non-Indigenous peers (ABS, 2014) and that Indigenous youth can be up to two and a half years behind their peers in maths, science and reading literacy (Dreise & Thomson, 2014).

Lifting Indigenous young people's attendance, retention and successful completion of secondary schooling represents a sizeable and ongoing challenge for Australia. It opens up questions about the types of investments and interventions that Australia's education systems should be making to close gaps. The Australian government appears to be operating on the basis that getting young people to school is the most important first step by recruiting 400 school attendance officers to bolster school attendance. According to the government, the truancy officers have helped increase school attendance by 14 per cent in the first month of operation in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland (Stewart, 2014). However, will truancy officers be enough to close the ongoing gaps in educational outcomes?

This paper draws upon international educational research that could be considered in Australia's approach to secondary schooling choices for many Indigenous young people. It presents a model called 'Learning, Earning, Yearning', which is built on an expansive approach to education. It responds to a sense of 'yearning' among Indigenous young people as defined by their quest for safety, connection to culture and place, jobs, inclusion and support measures aimed at reducing the stresses of schooling and life outside school. The paper begins by capturing ongoing challenges in Indigenous education before presenting a case for curriculum expansion and greater choices for Indigenous learners.

An ongoing challenge

For approximately one in two Indigenous young people, school education is not engaging them through to successful completion of Year 12. This impacts on their ability to go on to learn at university and earn reasonable incomes through employment. Hunter (2010) highlights the importance of first overcoming the 'barriers' to education and training by beginning with the crucial recognition of the 'diverse and distinct cultural and social life experiences of Indigenous school leavers' (p. 1). Haswell, Blignault, Fitzpatrick & Jackson-Pulver make similar observations in their report on the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people:

> … many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience life circumstances that seriously challenge their social and emotional wellbeing and limit their capacity to fulfil their life potential. This most likely contributes to and results from the visible disparities across most measures of health, education, employment and involvement in the justice system. (2003, p. 11)

Similarly, research undertaken through the 'What Works'[1] program in Indigenous education highlights

---

1 http://whatworks.edu.au

a range of determinants of Indigenous participation and retention in school, including family expectations and responsibilities, poor health and family finance, language and culture, bullying and harassment, teacher attitudes and school atmospheres, past educational performance and educational relevance[2]. When this multitude of issues is seen in its entirety, it is not surprising that the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of Australian 15-year-olds conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research found higher degrees of anxiety about school testing among Indigenous students (Dreise & Thomson, 2014).

The case for curriculum expansion

Purdie, Milgate and Bell (2011) highlight the importance of culturally reflective and relevant education. Fogarty (2012) also argues that learning content for Indigenous students needs to be:

> engaging, accessible and culturally responsive with a school culture that supports this and builds on high expectations for all students. Second, you need to empower, support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enhance their own learning capacity, while also building and sustaining teacher capacity.

The call for more engaging learning experiences for young people is an international one. For instance, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (n.d.) in the United States contends that:

> For too long in too many schools, young people have been provided a learning experience that so undermotivates, undereducates and underprepares that they are left reaching for remedial preparation for the careers, further education, and civic participation they seek. In the worst situations, young people are neither healthy nor safe, neither engaged nor supported, and certainly not challenged.

2   http://whatworks.edu.au/upload/1250830979818_
    file_5Engagement.pdf

Lucas, Claxton and Spencer (2013) in their book *Expansive education: Teaching learners for the real world* suggest that future education programs will need to cultivate 'learning dispositions' among young people. This includes the ability to be adaptive, creative and collaborative. Similarly, Voogt and Roblin (2012), in their comparative analysis of competencies in the 21st century, highlight the importance of learning dispositions. They refer to 'mind workers' as being critical in a future that is likely to be complex and unpredictable (p. 300).

As complexity is part and parcel of contemporary Indigenous Australia, our ability to help grow the 'mind workers' of the future is critically important to the very future of Indigenous Australia as a whole. Given that approximately 40 per cent of the Indigenous Australian population is under the age of 17 years, it is vital that they are being prepared – and are preparing themselves – for the opportunities and challenges of tomorrow. To this end, their personal 'agency' is key. Hannon, Gillinson and Shanks (2013) help explain this notion: 'Agency is all about the ability to take control of our lives – to see, understand and act on what we believe to be important' (p. 137).

Research points to the importance of contextualisation and personalisation of learning. Neal (2013), for instance, contends that secondary schools are less 'student centred' and more 'subject centred' than primary schools. He cites a number of characteristics of student-centred approaches, including: 'being based on a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives, catering for individual differences in interest, achievement and learning styles, and developing students' abilities to take control over their own learning' (p. 18).

McCombs and Miller (2009) criticise the notion of one-size-fits-all models of learning, standardised curriculum and enforced testing. Instead, they draw upon large-scale research that finds that 'learner-centred education' reaps dividends for students and teachers alike. They identity a sizeable meta-analysis to support their claim that person- and learner-centred education is associated with large increases in student participation and motivation. The analysis also shows positive effects in self-esteem and fewer incidents of school drop-out. McCombs and Miller (2009) and Meier (2002) highlight the need for learning that is relevant, meaningful and authentic. Meier suggests that inquiry-based learning and project-based learning enjoy high levels of success, particularly with struggling students.

Leadbeater and Wong (2010) advocate for learning innovation by suggesting that while school reform

is important, it is not enough to provide learning experiences that are meaningful, relevant and impactful for students from disadvantaged areas. Instead, they call for 'disruptive innovation' through a blend of formal and informal learning.

Hannon, Gillinson and Shanks (2013) provide highly relevant conceptual guidance for the types of learning challenges and opportunities that Indigenous young people potentially face. They write about empowering learners to develop personal agency that takes them from being mere consumers of learning to active producers of it. They identify a model whereby young people are facilitated through a process of skills updating and matching, to generating solutions to local challenges, to creating local economic and social possibilities.

Fadel (2012) posits that 'knowledge' needs to be connected to the real world to ensure that learners are engaged and motivated. He argues for a greater balance between conceptual and practical learning and consideration for knowledge that sparks student entrepreneurialism and ethical behaviour. With regard to 'skills', he highlights the '4 Cs': creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. He is concerned by curriculum that is overloaded with content when students should be 'deep diving' into projects. Fadel's model emphasises the importance of 'character' and moral traits (integrity, justice, empathy, ethics), along with young people's capacity to learn how to learn. He highlights the significance of interdisciplinarity in helping position young people to respond to current and future demands.

Conclusion: A way forward

If Australia wants to see more Indigenous young people complete Year 12 and go onto university or participate fully in civic life, then complementary action is required both outside school gates (in overcoming the significant obstacles they face, such as poverty) and inside school gates (including the provision of learning experiences that truly engage). Customised curriculum (without losing intellectual rigour) provides a way forward.

The following model, illustrated in Figure 1, draws upon the above-mentioned themes by placing them in an Indigenous Australian context.

At the heart of the model is the notion of 'learner-centredness'. 'Place' is another key driver, given that approximately 85 per cent of Indigenous young people attend a local public school and in light of Indigenous cultural preferences for staying on country. Developing entrepreneurial mindsets, supporting personal agency and fostering creativity underpins the model so that learners are not simply consumers of learning, but producers of it. Further, the model simultaneously embraces the idea that young people should grow not only their identity but their character. Lifelong and life-wide learning is at the top of the model to symbolise the need for learning dispositions.

The model is partly inspired by a program from the United States that simultaneously embraces 'mainstream subjects' with Indigenous goals. Sorenson (2013) documents the Navajo School Model in the United States, in which students engage in both a science, technology, engineering and mathematics program and what they call the 'STAR' program, meaning 'Service to All Relations'. STAR involves project-based learning, which is designed to create benefits for the community and the environment.

The future choices we make in educational research, policy and practice will have a significant bearing on the types of positive choices that Indigenous young people can make about their futures. We should be all yearning for stronger futures and choices.

References

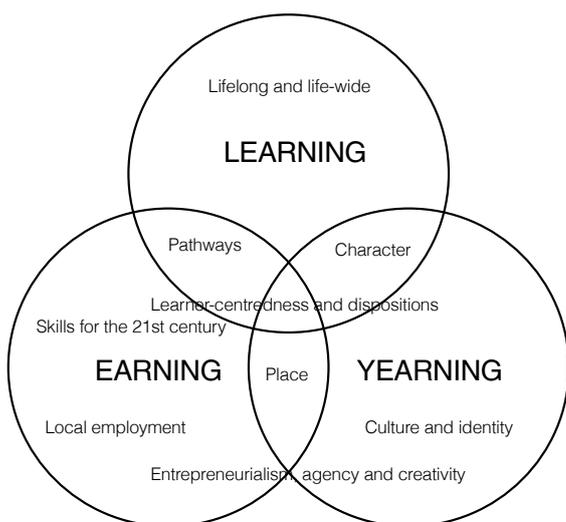Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (n.d.). *A whole child approach to education and the Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/policy/CCSS-and-Whole-Child-one-pager.pdf

Figure 1   Learning, earning, yearning

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *Media release: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students staying at school longer; national student/teacher ratios stable.* Canberra: Author.

Broome, R. (2010). *Aboriginal Australians: A history since 1788.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Dreise, T., & Thomson, S. (2014). *Unfinished business: PISA shows Indigenous youth are being left behind.* Camberwell: ACER. Retrieved from http://rd.acer.edu.au/article/a-way-forward-in-improving-indigenous-learning

Fadel, C. (2012). *What should students learn in the 21st century?* OECD. Retrieved from http://oecdeducationtoday.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/what-should-students-learn-in-21st.html

Fogarty, B. (2012). *Learning for the western world? The Indigenous education dilemma.* Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/learning-for-the-western-world-the-indigenous-education-dilemma-11326

Hannon, V., Gillinson, S., & Shanks, L. (2013). *Learning a living: Radical innovation in education for work.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Haswell, M. R., Blignault, I., Fitzpatrick, S., & Jackson-Pulver, L. (2013). *The social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous youth: Reviewing and extending the evidence and examining its implications for policy and practice.* University of New South Wales: Muru Marri.

Hunter, B. H. (June 2010). Pathways for Indigenous school leavers to undertake training or gain employment, *Resource sheet No. 2* produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: Australian Institute for Health and Welfare.

Leadbeater, C., & Wong, A. (2010). *Learning from extremes.* San Jose, CA: Cisco Systems Inc.

Lucas, B., Claxton, G., & Spencer, E. (2013). *Expansive education: Teaching learners for the real world.* Camberwell: ACER.

McCombs, B., & Miller, L. 2009. *The school leader's guide to learner-centred education.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Meier, D. (2002). *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC). (2013). *National Report on Social Equity in VET 2013.* Canberra: Australian Government.

Neal, G. (2013). Accommodating new learning in different school cultures. In T. McKenna, M. Cacciattolo & M. Vicars (Eds.), *Engaging the disengaged: Inclusive approaches to teaching the least advantaged.* Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Pechenkina, E., & Anderson, I. (2011). *Consultation paper on Indigenous Australian higher education: Trends, initiatives and policy implications.* Canberra: Australian Government.

Purdie, N., Milgate, G., & Bell, H. R. (2011). *Two way teaching and learning: Toward culturally reflective and relevant education.* Camberwell: ACER.

Sorensen, M. (2013). The STAR (Service to all Relations) Navajo School Model. In Four Arrows, K. England-Aytes, G. Cajete, R. M. Fisher, B. A. Mann, E. McGaa, & M. Sorensen, *Teaching Truly: A Curriculum to Indigenize Mainstream Education.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Stewart, A. (2014). *Truancy officers boost attendance at remote Indigenous schools.* Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-27/truancy-officers-remote-indigenous-schools-attendance-up-figures/5287606

Voogt, J., & Roblin, N. P. (2012). A comparative analysis of international frameworks for 21st century competencies: Implications for national curriculum policies. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 44*(3), 299–321.