

Teaching Literacy To Aboriginals Through Art

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Today the information I am presenting is from my own teaching observation whilst working for the Department of Corrective Services. I am not talking to you today as an expert of Aboriginal Culture, heritage or communities, rather; I will present to you the correlation between Art and Literacy where the majority of my students have been Aboriginal.

I hope today, this presentation will help other Non-Aboriginal teachers be aware of the different transitions Aboriginal students work through when using Art as a medium in leading to literacy.

The 2 case studies that I have chosen are from my teaching experience at Long Bay Gaol in Sydney. I teach art to Koori blokes and to any of the Non-Aboriginal blokes that are interested. The exercises I've given my 2 students are different in as far that they have different interests but they are essentially much the same, although both students come at the exercise from different angles.. The first case study is a Koori man aged 35 and I've asked him to do and describe the screenprinting picture he did in my class.

The second case study is a Non -Aboriginal (middle class man) also aged 35 with a background of heroin use. I've asked him to do a screenprint and write about it.

Case Study No. 1

Koori man (aborigine) aged 35 in Long Bay Gaol. Went to grade 5 in school (primary level). He has functional literacy and spelling. I'll call him John. John grew up on a mission. At this point, I think it might be a good idea to describe what a mission is, because I'm sure some of you don't have a full picture as I didn't. The Missions were run by Christians therefore everybody was taught Christianity. The Missions did not teach people the ability to be independent, food was bought in so therefore there was a buy up system. The Mission was controlled by the Government and then a Mission

Manager. Work was directed and no money was received. The schools within the Mission were run by Christians not teachers. The Aboriginals were never allowed to speak their tongue or to practice singing, dancing or traditional hunting. They had their names taken away from them and were given Christian names. Everybody had to have ID and they needed permission to leave. If they did not abide by the rules of the Mission they were kicked out and often ended up on a Reserve instead. A Reserve on the other hand, was an area where Aboriginals were told they had to live. It was out of town, it was land nobody wanted ie. No Non-Aboriginal. Therefore they were segregated from the main stream of society. The Reserve was definitely controlled by the Government and inevitably by the Police.

John started out on a Mission much like I described and then attended several primary schools in Northern N.S.W. in the Kempsey region (he is part of the Dhunghatti tribe). His attendance at school was poor. “The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths observed that ‘opting out’ (of education) may be a political act, as well as an expression of Aboriginal identity in the face of an alienating and non-responsive system; at the same time the power of the State over educational participation means in practice that school-refusers can be further marginalised-and criminalised....It is still too often assumed that ‘all that’ is in the past and ‘we treat them equal’ these days – as if equity was ‘treating them equal’ when people are not equal to start with. And the after –effects persist. School experiences of their parents are critical in determining Aboriginal students’ attitudes to schooling now- even more so the experiences of the grandparent generation, which is so important in Aboriginal communities.”¹

¹ Teaching Aboriginal Studies ed Rhonda Craven p65.

It follows, therefore, that John did not attempt high school level due to the issues previously mentioned and his family's relocating and problems with the law and poverty. John ended up in Boys Homes (Juvenile Detention Centres) during puberty for car theft and other offences. During one period of detention of 8 months John attended education classes and enjoyed his experiences in the artroom. He had always generally hated school and the traditional learning environment. He achieved good results in art classes for the first time in his educational history. However, this was cut short due to being moved to another boys home for disciplinary purposes.

Throughout his adolescence he continued to clash with the law. As his family broke down their support was sporadic, so these incidents escalated into his current situation of adult custody at Long Bay Gaol for a period of several years for serious offences.

John is reluctant to write or fill out forms and is only functionally literate. He prefers to have other people fill out forms for him and is able to avoid most cases where writing is necessary. His spelling is only phonic, punctuation is minimal, no capitals are used at sentence beginnings or proper nouns. Reading is at a snails pace though he improves over time. He remembers the sounding out rules when instructed. John refuses to write at first, he hates his handwriting and is unsure when to use upper or lower case. Over time and through his work in the art class, John writes with more interest as it becomes "practical" concern. He is required to take note of the process of screenprinting. Literacy is incorporated into his art class thus.

For an exhibition of local koori art John is required to submit a brief description of the work he intends to exhibit. With assistance the following piece of writing was generated using the scribing technique. The text was also re – used and incorporated into several personal worksheets.

1. Class exercise

2. Look, cover and write for spelling
3. Reading
4. Comprehension.

The text was scribed with John closely following my hand. Writing down each of his words as he said them. In this way the language and syntax involved recollection to assist his actual comprehension.:

“This is a bag I screenprinted. The picture on the bag is of a snake. Snakes are found round about the parts I grewed up in they cant really kill you but they give you a bloody good bite. I drewed the snake with a koori pattern on the belly of the snake. You got to keep it simple or its too hard to cut with a cutter. I used red cause it was how you feel about snakes how they make us mob feel.”

It should be noted that John was only able to put word to paper after he had done a visual representation first.

Case Study 2

Non-Aboriginal middle class man aged 35 in Long Bay Gaol. He went to Year 10 in High school .He has quite good literacy skills and has few problems with spelling.

I'll call him Mike.. Mike grew up in a Northern suburb of Sydney, with his parents, his sister and his grandmother living in a granny flat out the back. He and his sister were adopted at birth – something he always knew. Both his parents worked. He went to the one primary school and one high school. So his home life was stable to that extent.

Mike succeeded in school in a very ordinary way. He was not a brilliant pupil but certainly had no trouble learning. It comes out almost as an afterthought that his adopted mother was an alcoholic and home life was mostly very miserable. Mike has no problem filling out forms, his spelling is fairly good. He tends to write only with capitals, so I suspect he is unsure about punctuation. When I ask him to do a picture

and write me a paragraph about an experience in gaol, he is keen and is able to do it alone without my help. He writes his paragraph first (not about an experience) but about a decision he has made. He believed he was writing about an experience. :

“I V’E DECIDED TO GIVE UP SMOKING! I WISH IT WAS FOR HEALTH REASONS BUT ITS’ NOT, IT’S BECAUSE I’M SICK TO DEATH OF BEING A TOBACCONIST AND HAVING TO CONSTANTLY EVERY HOUR OF THE DAY PASS OUT CIGARETTES’ TO PEOPLE I DON’T EVEN LIKE!...MARRIED A REGISTERED NURSE, THE WHOLE TIME FROM 1979 TO 1994 WORKED FOR BUTTERWORTHS PUBLISHERS, WORKING MY WAY FROM APPRENTICE TO PRODUCTION MNGR, RESIGNED IN 94 DUE TO HEROIN AND SOLD MY HOUSE * ‘HERE I AM’.”

Only after he has written his paragraph does he think about doing an artwork about the problems of smoking. He is not at all visually imaginative, unlike the Koori bloke. His learning is very specifically word orientated.

Mike the Non-Aboriginal is articulate and is part of the ‘specific cultural practice’ of the white middle class teachers he had at school. (from the same background).

John the Koori man is also very articulate. His articulateness comes directly from his ability to be visual. He is from a completely different ‘cultural practice’ to that of his teachers. He has reached the point where he is able to express himself with the written word when prompted because of his visual involvement i.e. his work in screenprinting and painting. I conclude from my own experiences this is a very effective way of teaching literary practice to the Koori students that I have.

Book

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