

## **Workshop 3: Quantum Leap? Sudden Great Advance**

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Imagine what it must be like to wake up in Alice Springs as a traditional Aboriginal man.

You speak four languages, are knowledgeable in Aboriginal Law, have little English and no job. You're from a remote community and Alice Springs is on Arrernte land. You slept in the dry riverbed for a week and are dirty, hungry and tired. You're arrested for drunk driving, and some outstanding warrants.

In prison you are well fed and housed. You start education. The teacher discovers that you need glasses. Now you see better. In literacy classes you write something in English and read it aloud to class. This is a first and everyone is pleased.

You do an alcohol treatment program. Your sentence is complete and you are back in the river. Things are just as bad and now you have a prison record. You're arrested again. This time you bashed someone. You get a longer sentence. The Court orders more treatment programs. People say the alcohol program didn't work because you re-offended. You go back to education. The target is to get you a job and some public housing in town.

Is this a probability or a quantum leap?

### **Background**

Alice Springs is a thriving town in the so-called red centre of Australia. It is a busy centre for tourism, a service town for remote mining operations, a transport hub for freight, cattle stations and camel operations, a handling centre for the Adelaide to Alice Springs' railway, soon to be open for business to Darwin. It is the crossroads for travellers to Ayers Rock, Broome, Kakadu, Perth, Darwin and beyond, and is known for such events as the Henly-on-Todd dry-river boat race. Asia is as near as anywhere else. Alice Springs draws skilled employees from all corners of Australia and overseas. The town has a population of some 27,000 people and boasts a Casino, Convention Centre, several Resorts and a Cultural Precinct containing several art galleries and a 500-seat performing arts theatre. This modern town services an area three times the size of Victoria including parts of WA, SA and Queensland. It is situated 600 metres above sea level, on ancient land surfaces surrounded by mountains that were once as high as the Rocky Mountains of the USA. The Finke River, to the west, is reputed to be the oldest watercourse on earth. Housing is at a premium and land is scarce and very expensive.

I can't know what it's like to wake up in the morning in Alice Springs as a traditional Aboriginal man, but approximately 90% of all prisoners attending education at Alice Springs prison are Aboriginal men, so it is obviously not an advantage.

As well as education and training, I manage post-release employment and through this I encounter some of the barriers that impact on my hypothetical man. He is typical of many

prisoners at Alice Springs Correctional Centre, which is a men-only prison that holds up to 400 prisoners. Being such a small prison enables collaborations that would possibly be unmanageable in a larger institution.

### **The environment**

At ASCC, education and behaviour change programs are all part of the Offender Program Management Branch and they operate out of the same building. Vocational Training is given literacy support both in classroom teaching and on the job. When the teaching and training staff approach the issue of education or behaviour change programs for a prisoner, they work together to explore the end game and work backwards.

Where is he planning to live post release? Is he welcome to go back there? Are there pay-back issues? Has he got a strategy to stay out of prison? Has he got a driver's licence? Has he ever had one? Is he disqualified from getting one? Has he got the ID he will need to get a tax file number? What opportunities for employment exist where he says he will be living? What skills does he have, and what skills does he need? Is there any infrastructure at his community? What is his level of literacy?

All these things impact on his daily survival, as you well know, and may put him at risk of re-offending, but the lack of literacy skills is probably his single greatest disadvantage.

I'd like to frame the background that contributes to his circumstances.

NT Minister John Ah Kit stated, most of the Northern Territory's 50,000 Aborigines, about 30% of the NT population, live in 680 small, remote communities. The average age is 21 years and deaths from childhood disease are double mainstream levels. Overcrowding is acute, where up to 20 people share a standard 3-bedroom house.

Approximately 65% of NT prisoners are Aboriginal adult males. As mentioned, probably 90% of those who present for education are from this group. As you are aware, Aboriginal people have some of the lowest levels of education in the country. Those in custody are often at the bottom of this scale. Some may speak 2 or 3 Aboriginal languages, be very knowledgeable in Aboriginal Law and Custom, but have very little English and not a lot of understanding of non-Aboriginal ways. You have to realise that the Pintubi language people had their first contact with Europeans in the 1960s.

The social disadvantage for these Indigenous men is enormous as they are marginalised in every day life. Prisoners come from a wide range of communities, from urban to remote and from the tropical top-end to the arid desert.

The fixed milestones of imprisonment and release dates impact on our ability to control timetables in a way not experienced by other teaching organisations. It would be a whole lot more convenient for us if the Courts would organise prisoners' sentences to suit school semesters. But I don't suppose that will ever happen!

Many Indigenous prisoners may suffer the effects of substance abuse and have retention problems. In prison, these same men are healthy, well fed, well housed and sober. They are keen to improve their reading and writing and we have created a welcoming environment where they feel OK about coming to school. Their last experience of school was probably when they were 12 to 14 years old, even though school is compulsory in the NT for all children up to 15 years of age.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, Indigenous people have lower literacy skills than any other group of Australians. For most of them it is a direct result of lower educational opportunities. 73% of all Australian students stay on at school to year 12, but only 32% of Indigenous students stay on. Bob Collins (2003) said that he is ashamed that in the NT it is just 2% of Indigenous students who make it to year 12. Collins reiterated the facts we have all heard so many times about the three main problems facing Indigenous communities, which are Health, Education and Housing. They are not mutually exclusive.

The role of education for Indigenous offenders seems to be either largely misunderstood or grossly underestimated. While it is an offender's behaviour that lands him in prison, addressing only the behaviour does not address all the causes of this behaviour. The courts will often recommend Anger Management or Alcohol Awareness treatment programs, but they never recommend literacy education. Crime is often the result of opportunity, brought about by unemployment, lack of skills and low self-esteem (Crime Prevention Forum, 2003). Training and education can address many of these issues and help reduce recidivism.

English literacy, both oral and written, is fundamental to effective communication in the wider community. English is the accepted national language. Australia is renown for being a multi-literacy society and some Australian communities show a willingness to accommodate the multi-literacies of their residents. Interpreters are readily found for Italian, Greek and Vietnamese speakers, but are seldom made available for Indigenous speakers. Consequently, a lot of low-level Indigenous offenders are unsure of the legal reasons that have put them in prison.

We see wide media campaigns about issues of health, driving and smoking and assume that the messages can reach the target groups. Recently, an Aboriginal prisoner admitted to me that he has many prior convictions for drink driving, but this time he was not drunk. "This time I was sober driving", he said, "I only had a six-pack." It is obvious that the media campaign designers assume he would know what being drunk means. He knows that other times he was "falling down" drunk, but he doesn't think this was the case this time.

### **The literacy process**

Ideas can be thought of as abstracts originating as visual pictures that are translated through some form of literacy. Imagine a prison mantrap as a metaphor for an idea. The idea is first conceived in abstract - in the mantrap. It needs to be articulated – released from the mantrap. The creator of the idea elaborates it into a literacy form, either oral or written. If you have no understanding of the literacy you are isolated from the idea – unable to enter (or exit) the mantrap. Therefore, just as the prisoner is powerless because the custodial officer has the mantrap key, so too is the person without literacy skills because he doesn't have the key.

We live in a world of written information. We are daily faced with signs, forms, supermarket shelves, IT etc. Education in literacy is vitally necessary to navigate this maze, but education in literacy alone will fail if it doesn't recognise cultural difference.

For an Aboriginal man, for whom English is at best, a second language, but might be a third or fourth, answering a simple question is a complicated process. He may need to translate into one, two or three different languages to fully grasp the question, and then translate back before he answers. Because he seems to be without an answer, as he is

taking a long time to respond, it is too often mistaken for not understanding the question, so it might be repeated slowly, or loudly, which causes him to start the process over.

Understanding the literacy is much more than having a cursory grasp of English. If an idea were about something technical – motor vehicles for example – some knowledge of motor vehicles would be essential. Aboriginal people are not only pretty good at fixing motor vehicles, but can often keep them going long past their use-by date, as any of you who have seen the TV series, *Bush Mechanics*, will know. Often they have learned to improvise and use “found objects” to fix vehicles (we don’t drive cars in the NT, we drive vehicles) because they can’t access spare parts, nor do they know what the parts are called. They work with vehicle parts and get by because they do it together.

On the other hand, isolation and remoteness can be starting points for ingenuity, so bits of fencing wire, tree branches and old thongs become substitutes for high-tech parts.

We have found that the starting levels of literacy for most Indigenous prisoners in ASCC can be placed into the following categories:

- Low: little or no alphabet recognition
- Medium: Can recognise the alphabet but not able to form sentences
- High: Can form sentences, read simple sentences but may not be able to sound out words.
- Very High: Can read independently and write sentences, but may need some help with structure grammar and punctuation.

Helena Zielinski (2002) observed that the foundation for adult prisoners’ basic education across Australia is the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA). She quotes from Yaxley (2002)

All acts of communication take place in a cultural space. The words and sentences that make up a text can only be meaningfully understood and produced when there is a critical awareness of the cultural contexts and spaces in which texts are produced and received.

In the absence of a meaningful understanding of English, an Aboriginal man may use “bits of fencing wire, tree branches and old thongs” as scaffolding for his literacy too. Away from his community, and especially in town, he has few skills in communication and is often confused. He has learned that most questions are best answered with a “yes”. This at least keeps the white man off his back, but misunderstanding leads to frustration and anger. Getting drunk is a way to escape. Drunkenness leads to violence and drink driving. It also leads to prison and to education.

Because of the cultural contexts, we have found that a more appropriate course for our particular clients is the Certificate I & II in spoken & Written English (CSWE), developed by the Australian Migrant Education Service (AMES). However, migrants have often had some previous education, so while cultural differences are considered, they may already read and write in their native language. Indigenous people on the other hand, come from a culture rich in oral history and visual imagery.

Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), who we refer to locally as Batchelor, in conjunction with AMES, has developed some excellent resources to support

the CSWE course, called *Little Bit by Little Bit*. We have also adopted THRASS resources that originate from the UK, and are used by some other Australian practitioners. Using these tools, Aboriginal men who have had little exposure to education, but are keen to learn in the prison environment, can go from knowing little or nothing of reading and writing to reading sentences in 2 weeks. Within 4 weeks they can be constructing and writing sentences which they are happy to read aloud in class. A big percentage of these prisoners learn to read and write well enough to read the newspaper within 2 months. It is interesting that a combination of a course designed for migrants, tools designed primarily for children with learning difficulties and complimentary tools developed for Aboriginal people are so successful. What works is the visual and cross-cultural nature of the resources.

At last the mystery of English starts to unfold for them. But is it really that effective?

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2003, one of our students was a finalist in the NT Literary Awards and his work was published. It is a short story about his Grandfather, and to get a work published was a great achievement. He is a Warlpiri man and this achievement has encouraged his fellow students so much that a book of stories and poems is in the think tank now. It helps that his teacher is a published writer.

The Australian Institute of Criminology identifies four key approaches to community crime prevention. Right up there at the top is education. Education is related to community social order and socioeconomic status, which translates to empowerment.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education and Training has a vision. This vision sets out to achieve:

A vocational education and training system which renews and shares an Indigenous learning culture with all Australians in a spirit of reconciliation, equity, justice and community economic development and sustainability.

### **Professional development**

Professional development in cross-cultural training is often offered for workers in Central Australia. This is generally a two-day course, so is obviously a very superficial study of a complex issue. It is a general introduction to cross-cultural training and I feel that Prison Officers, who do this course only, are worse off than if they didn't do any at all. They get a false confidence that they know all about Aboriginal culture.

All education staff at ASCC has been selected for skills and qualifications, but most of all for experience in working with Indigenous people, and especially on remote Aboriginal communities. For instance, we have an IT educator who has worked with Warlpiri Media at Yuendumu as well as building web sites for several remote area art centres. There is a literacy educator who has a Bachelor degree in nursing and a Bachelor degree in education. She has worked at Papunya in both disciplines, and is a published writer. The music teacher has his own recording studio and has a background in the music industry in Central Australia spanning twenty 20 years. Aboriginal artists dominate much of the Central Australian music industry. He has also worked for CAAMA Media. Together, they have many other skills, but their experience working with Aboriginal people, and their knowledge of the remote community conditions that their clients come from, informs their teaching practices.

With an integrated approach to education and behaviour change programs, much progress has been made with literacy levels for Indigenous prisoners. The employment program is starting to work and the success is becoming infectious, both with prisoners and employers. But most jobs require that you have a current driving licence. Almost 30% of Aboriginal offenders have motor vehicle offences.

Driving a motor vehicle in remote areas of Central Australia is often about survival and getting somewhere with the only possible means of transport. Whether the vehicle has insurance, registration or brakes is of little importance and a current driving licence even less. After 500 Kilometres of bad road, the comfort of driving in town seems to be a luxury, yet it becomes fraught with new challenges. The obvious skills of someone who is proficient in bush driving and keeping a sick vehicle alive, go unrecognised when he fails to produce the necessary piece of plastic with photo attached.

Lack of a licence has been a big barrier for employment so we decided to develop a driver-training program with several partnership organisations. A Ford sedan was donated to the program by the CAAMA media association. This vehicle was restored as a teaching project for prisoners in the automotive course, where it was converted to dual control. A suitable driving track was constructed in the low security area of the prison, known as the Cottages. The track includes some portable traffic lights and incorporates the main roundabout at the prison entrance. This is where the training takes place, but the testing is carried out in normal traffic conditions in town, 25 Kilometres away, with a prison officer in the back seat. This slide shows why we are not worried about losing the vehicle.

On Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> September, the driver-training program was officially launched at the prison. The Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Correctional Services, Peter Toyne, presented five prisoners with their driving licence. This was the first time three of them had ever held a licence, and between them they already had seventeen driving related offences to their credit – or is that debit?

The Superintendent spoke about a change in prison culture that sees a prison officer taking a back seat to a prisoner, while he has driver training. He recognised that it has been a process of education for the custodial staff as well as the learner-drivers. Many had been sceptical about the possible success of the program, and some had been outright resistant, but it is obviously successful and politically acceptable.

Now we want to focus prisoners on education beyond prison. I am currently negotiating with BIITE to take over the delivery of literacy programs at the Cottages. I reason that when prisoners qualify to go to the Cottages, their security allows some of them to join out-of-prison work parties and some are eligible for day release. By forming a partnership with BIITE, we will encourage prisoners to engage in education that will continue post release. BIITE has campuses in Central Australia and the Top-end as well as Annexes on some remote communities. As an Aboriginal organisation they have a focus on programs that target appropriate employment opportunities in communities. They run similar courses to those that ASCC runs within the prison, including art and music which are major employment areas.

I am currently lobbying for more “Open” category security ratings so that a group of prisoners can attend classes together at BIITE campus in Alice Springs. Although they have males in some of their classes, amongst prisoners, it is generally thought of as a Women’s College. If I can send even four men at once they will not feel so threatened, and

we can overcome this reluctance. The rumour about it being a Women's College came about because a female prisoner attended there a few years ago to study as an Aboriginal Health Worker.

Of course, prison rumours easily start and sometimes are just as easy to stop.

## **Conclusion**

This is never going to be a fast process. At least forty thousand years of hunter-gatherer cultural thinking, coupled with a rich oral and visual history has preserved one of the world's oldest cultures, living amongst some of the oldest land formations on earth. The influence of Colonial and Missionary intervention has changed their life forever.

This has served to marginalise Aboriginal people and leave them disadvantaged. Major issues of land rights and Native title simply add to the conundrum. There are many organisations that claim to represent the best interests of Australia's Indigenous population but, in Central Australia, most Aboriginal adults will tell you that they don't need to be treated differently.

They need education for themselves and their kids, they want their husbands and sons back from prison and they just want the same opportunities as mainstream Australia.

Long-term residents say that there can only be one of three reasons why anyone goes to Central Australia to work, and they refer to the three M's.

You must either be a Mercenary, Missionary or a Misfit

When I see and smell the salt water, here on the Gold Coast, and I think of sailing and fishing, I think I must certainly be the Misfit.

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