# CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION : AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

Cross-cultural communication involves understanding words and actions of people from differing backgrounds. It is becoming more widely recognised that a good deal of misunderstanding occurs between members of different racial groups. This is due to people interpreting the words and actions of others in terms of their own understanding and assuming that these are shared.

Most Australians including those with professional qualifications, have had little personal exposure to the original Australians, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Nor have they had the opportunity to learn about Australia's heritage in their own education.

Generally communication between professionals and their clients is carried out using English with its patterns and sociolinguistic conventions. Even simple personal greetings can show how cross-cultural communication can break down when Aboriginal speakers and English speakers interact.

It may appear to an English speaking professional that an Aboriginal client speaks and understands English well, in reality this may be not true. Often Aborigines have difficulty in comprehending what the professional wants of them because it is not conveyed in a way they understand. Sometimes communication breakdown may have its roots in the sociolinguistic differences in the rules and conventions which structure the discourse patterns in the respective languages.

Many Aboriginal people use Aboriginal English in their homes, and use 'standard' English as their second language.

## Culture and Language

When first contact is made with a client it is accepted practice among English speakers to ask the client's name. A professional may have little success with this strategy as he/she may be breaking some Aboriginal rules of protocol. Personal names are not used as freely among Aborigines with traditional backgrounds as they are among non-Aborigines and in some cases avoidance relationships may prohibit speaking the name in the presence of certain people. Nor is direct questioning regarded as proper. Professionals who are aware, will seek such information from a third party when communicating with Aboriginal people.

The English language has many greeting words and responses with which to greet friends or acquaintances, depending on the closeness of the relationship and whether or not the participants wish to engage in further conversation. A reciprocal "Hello" or "G'Day" merely acknowledges the existence of the other party while "Hi! How are you? Haven't seen you for a while" invites further interaction. While the more formal "Good Morning. How are you today?" is open ended. The speaker may not

be really concerned with the answer to the question, rather it is establishing a relationship and a possible opening for further conversation.

Regardless of which greeting is selected, it is more or less obligatory for English speaking people to acknowledge each other when they meet. Most Aboriginal cultures and languages have neither the obligation not the necessary vocabulary. Aborigines use a much less formalised system and often there are no words to equate with "Hello". However, an Aborigine meeting a non-Aborigine may know some greeting is expected and may say "Where are you going?". This is equivalent to the non-Aboriginal greeting of "How are you?". No answer is really expected. A non-Aborigine might regard such a question as an invasion of privacy, especially if he/she does not wish their destination to be known. This is not the intention.

There is often a communication breakdown between Aborigines and English speaking professionals. The conventions of conversation and language patterns vary between cultures. These may be inadvertently broken when Aborigines and non-Aborigines interact through English. Professionals need to be aware of this. Professional language and concepts can be outside the understanding of clients.

Professionals may not only have language and conceptual problems when dealing with Aborigines. Their comparative affluence, their status, surroundings and value systems may be quite intimidating to Aboriginal clients. Dress, education level, attitudes, expectations and values highlight the difference in backgrounds.

lives in terms of caring, sharing, love of, and obligations to the land. Aboriginal history, culture and spiritual beliefs teach the history of Aboriginal Australia and form the basis of our being. From experience of living in this land a philosophy has developed which differs from that of the European tradition. It is not a speculative philosophy but one based on the permanence of the land.

Aboriginal philosophy, or world view, is connected to our environment through strong spiritual and emotional ties with the earth, our mother. With this philosophy and time scale individual life takes on much less importance than it does within European cultures. This has a bearing on our sense of history which is based on the group and its continuity rather that on individuals. Harmony with the natural world is stressed, rather than the approach of "man controlling nature" which has characterised European notions of progress.

There are cultural differences which must be understood before meaningful dialogue can proceed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The sense of words can be lost when they are translated into European terms of reference. Aboriginal terms of reference are those which belong to the land and the people. They grow out of our experience of the land and remain so despite the relatively recent advent of colonialism and the very different terms of reference introduced by the colonisers. Aboriginal terms of reference expressed, in English, include:

- the earth is our mother
- preserve and conserve
- share and care
- each others keeper (accountability)

- group based society
- decision making by consensus
- harmony between people and between people and the land
- knowledge to be sought, acquired, given and used properly
- other traditions as a base of handing on knowledge

The above terms of reference are distinctive and the antithesis of those embedded in European type organisations with which many professionals are familiar:

- exploitation of natural resources
- hierarchical and authoritarian
- competitive
- individualistic
- remote from clients
- knowledge is power
- institutionalised

## Cultural Differences

### The Family

The extended family plays a much greater role in Aboriginal life than for most non-Aborigines. There is a strong sense of shared responsibility and great reliance on family members. Obligations to the family are strong throughout life. Similarly, the sense of family / group ownership rather than individual ownership is prevalent as is an emphasis on commonly held virtues such as tolerance, compassion and generosity.

In this context "the family" includes an extensive range of relatives. Cousins are regarded as brothers and sisters. Indeed, it is quite accepted for children to be brought up by aunts and uncles or grandparents. They may be effectively "adopted" by these close relatives or just live with them for a time. Insofar as children are "owned" it is by the family not just by the parents, and the whole family is therefore responsible for them.

Western society is generally much more individualistic in emphasis and obligations to the family tend to be limited to close family members.

### Interviews

Aboriginal family members may feel closely involved in the problem the client has and may come to the interview with the client. They may even feel entitled to decide what to do for the client or may merely be there to provide the client with support. Traditionally women deal with women's problems. If an Aboriginal woman visits a male professional she may bring a close male relative with her to do the talking and decision making on her behalf.

### Names

Changing names and being known by more than one, is not unusual among Aborigines. This can be confusing to Europeans who seldom change names apart from by marriage.

To find out a client's surname a sensible first step is to ask for the family name. To merely ask "What is your name" may be responded to by giving a familiar name or nick-name, which may be different from the one stated on a birth certificate. Most Aborigines from traditional backgrounds have Aboriginal names and often have European given names as well. It is important to get the names correct to avoid later confusion. Aliases and honorary names may also have to be considered. Every effort should be made to pronounce names properly. This is important for all clients as it is profoundly basic to good manners everywhere, but a particular sign of respect in cultures which value respect highly.

**Time Orientation**

Very few traditionally oriented Aborigines have the non-Aboriginal preoccupation with time. Most Aboriginal reserves do not have public clocks. Time on an Aboriginal reserve or mission has been indicated by a bell or siren which sounded at set times to mark the beginning and end of certain periods e.g. lunch break. Time indication in such places is usually set by daily recurring events such as after lunch, after school, sunset. Clocktime is becoming more meaningful to such people but some still experience difficulty with the large numbers being in the morning and the smaller numbers in the afternoon. Some Aboriginal families have a lifestyle in which traditionally there has been little emphasis on time-keeping. Watches and clocks were unknown in pre-European Australia.

**Eye Contact**

The use of the eyes is another area where cultural differences exist. Non-Aborigines believe that meeting someone's gaze is a sign of sincerity and honesty which can maximise rapport. To some traditional Aboriginal people, direct eye contact is considered disrespectful. It is polite to look slightly to one side on the floor or upwards to the ceiling. Meeting someone's eyes may be done in times of confrontation and reprimand. (In Chinese cultures historically pictures were hung around the neck so that the other person had something to look at below the face, the picture being related to the standing of the person in society). However, there are Aborigines who do not behave as above, but are familiar with the European way of doing things.

**The Pause**

When talking to someone for whom English is a second language, professionals should realise that it is likely that the client may need time to frame an answer. They should not leap in assuming that the client has not understood.

**Questioning**

The manner in which questions are phrased can be critical to the whole success of cross-cultural communication. This applies even more so to people for whom English is a second language. Specifically, some types of questions should be avoided:

Double-barrelled questions i.e. Questions that require two answers:
"Did you see him hit your brother or anyone else?"

would be better asked as two separate questions to be sure that the correct answer is given.
Questions with an either / or choice in them:
"Can you come on Monday or Tuesday?"
A fluent English-speaker will know that the question asks for a choice and will tell you what their preference is. For an English as a second language speaker "yes" may seem like a correct response.

**Negative questions**

These are extremely common in English and have no equivalent in many Aboriginal languages. They are a common source of misunderstanding. Examples include:

"You'll do it won't you?"
"You saw him do it didn't you?"
"You didn't understand him did you?"

These could be answered in a completely opposite fashion by a fluent English speaker and a person who is not fluent in English: "You didn't understand him did you?" would be answered by a fluent English speaker with "no" meaning "no, I didn't understand him", whereas an Aborigine might answer "yes", meaning "yes, I didn't understand him".

"You can't come tomorrow?" Aborigine: "No" (I can't come". : "Yes" (I agree with you I can't come).

This source of problems is easily avoided by not using negative questions: "Can you come tomorrow?", or "Did you understand him?", are unambiguous ways of asking "You can come tomorrow can't you?", or "You didn't understand him did you?".

**Affirmation**

Sometimes an Aborigine will say "yes" immediately after a question is asked, showing that they understand the question, not that "yes" is the answer. It is wise not to rush in assuming that "yes" is the answer, but rather to pause and see if any qualification follows indicating the "yes" is just a reflex to being asked a question.

**Written versus Oral**

Aborigines have a strong oral tradition. The combination of that tradition and the uneasiness which many people have with written English may make written communicating difficult. Professionals should not assume because they are familiar with the written word an Aboriginal client will be also. Answering correspondence can often prove difficult.

**Shyness**

Just as Americans have a reputation for confidence and assertiveness. Aborigines have a reputation for shyness. It may be inappropriate to expect Aborigines to put themselves forward or assert themselves and it may be considered a sign of lack of

respect for them to do so. This is not however to be confused with a lack of self esteem.

Occasionally an Aborigine may exhibit behaviour which makes communication difficult. It is characterised by extreme non-communicativeness verbally, looking down or away or withdrawing.

Such behaviour can be caused by:

- Fear - of the unknown and being inexperienced in the area with which they are trying to deal.
- Shame - one of the most powerful personal emotions felt by Aborigines is that of 'shame'. It is not the same as shame experienced by non-Aborigines and is difficult to describe succinctly, but embarrassed, disgrace and humiliation are some of the emotions involved.
- A feeling of injustice.

The common denominator is the feeling of being disadvantaged. It is a behaviour over which the person has little control. It is a retreat from social contact. It is not associated with any particular personality type.

With someone in this frame of mind it is best to either leave that person alone or find someone they trust who can speak their language. One method guaranteed not to succeed is to keep talking at them. Patience and understanding are needed and adjournment of the discussion may be wise.

**Professional Education**

The training of professionals to deal effectively with Aborigines has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The Muirhead Royal Commission Interim Report into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has recognised that for many Aboriginal people:

- contact with people in authority, especially police officers is likely to produce conflict and tension. Through fear and reticence they do not assert their rights when confronted with white people holding positions of power and authority;
- if they speak out they will be labelled 'troublemaker's and their interests will be ignored.

Muirhead stated that "At the heart of this problem is the gulf created by history, culture, social status, and power which separates Aboriginal people from those exercising authority".

In the report the necessity for police and prison officers to be trained to understand the culture, history and lifestyle of Aboriginal people is stressed.

Muirhead also states that "Racist attitudes are endemic in Australian society and evidence ... suggests that such attitudes may be found to exist in the whole range of institutions with which Aboriginal people come into contact". To this I would add that all of these institutions would be staffed by professionals.

In a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs regarding non-Aboriginal teachers, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs made the following points which are also applicable to other professionals:

- Many teachers have had limited, if any, contact with Aboriginals. When appointed to schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal children, they often arrive with positive attitudes and high hopes, but are quite under prepared.
- The consequence of this lack of preparedness is often increasing frustration and the development of negative attitudes and low expectations of Aboriginal and Islander children. This may result in a lack of sensitivity by many teachers and the low expectation of Aboriginal student performance may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Conclusion

The tertiary education of most professional people has been and still is mainly concerned with technical competence. For most tertiary institutions cross-cultural issues and communication are not part of the educational diet of aspiring professionals.

Professionals need greater awareness of cultural differences and should examine the manner in which they communicate with clients from races other than their own.

Most groups have aspects of their culture and understanding of which, by professionals, will improve communication. It is important that professionals approach people from different cultural backgrounds with a warm, supportive, open minded, non-judgmental approach. However, stereotyping on the basis of race, is as inappropriate as it is on the basis of sex, age or socio-economic group.

The range of awareness that Aboriginal people have of how to best communicate with a non-Aboriginal person is quite extensive. The professional's awareness of cultural differences including languages, values and customs will assist both the professional and clients improve communication. It is vital that cross-cultural communication is looked at in all aspects and not restricted exclusively to language.

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The above article consists of excerpts from a paper entitled "Cross-cultural communication a professional education : an Aboriginal perspective" by Professor Colin Bourke presented to the Multicultural Communication Conference on 25th September 1989.