KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS AND CHANGE

The future for local knowledge traditions is, I believe, dependent on the creation of a third space, an interstitial space, in which local knowledge traditions can be reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust can be negotiated. Knowledge…will tend towards universal homogenous information at the expense of local knowledge traditions. If knowledge is recognized as both representational and performative it will be possible to create a space in which knowledge traditions can be performed together (Turnbull, 1997: 560–561).

The ‘compelling need’ discussed above, leads me to ask the following questions: Does schooling, compulsory education in State approved or operated institutions, do something different from what it purports to do for Indigenous children in Australia and Melanesia [and many other regions and countries]? Have the school-aged Indigenous children in the Murrin Bridge - Lake Cargelligo, Alice Springs, Wewak or Rabaul, ‘mainstream’ schools received an education appropriate to their needs? Are their communities’ convenient pools of rural or urban labour? Are they refuges for the survivors of a race? Is education another form of class control? Are Vanimo, Goldie River, Wewak, Murrin Bridge or Yuendumu unique in experiencing the suppression of communally based knowledge and pedagogy and the usurpation of community control over education by the state and private systems of schooling? Can Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy enrich the wider, dominant education and society?

Policies and practices of assimilation and paternalism are clearly destructive of Indigenous culture and identity, but many in power thwart community involvement and measures of control of cultural and educational programs. The reality is that profound cultural issues, such as language, custom, law and the spiritual values and traditions of a people, never exist separately from questions of economic and political power.

Social Change

Changes in education and social behaviour are key to this field. Resistance, persistence and adaptation of Indigenous elements in behaviour and organisation are of high interest to many social scientists and educators. How do they conceptualise change and Indigenous people?

Following Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim, traditional Australian and Melanesian anthropology was dominated by the structural-functional, social order paradigm. ‘What keeps society together’ was the central question. The clan, tribe or horde was seen as the commencement of a unilineal paradigm or pattern on a positivistic
progression towards modern, namely western, society was embedded in anthropological thought. Marc Gumbert and many others argue that this concept fosters a form of social Darwinism, a justification for internal colonialism and external colonial control. It diminishes our understanding of social change in Indigenous communities and the institutions with which they operate. While appreciating the value of much structural-functional research we certainly need to assess critically the conservative, functionalist, social order approach to analysis in this field.

The background to the conceptual challenges facing educators and community developers is the diversity of contexts in which Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Melanesian and many other Indigenous people live, and to which education must be appropriate. There could be seen to be a structural, unilinear paradigm between tribal, village and urban societies, but, as we shall see, it is more fruitful to explore the process and multi-causal situations of change than to envisage polar opposites and inevitable, deterministic stages.

Similarly, Robert Redfield’s folk-urban continuum has little relevance here. In brief, Redfield conceptualised ‘folk’ and ‘urban’ as polar types on his continuum of social change. A folk society was depicted as small, relatively isolated, homogeneous, non-literate, traditional and personal, while metropolitan society (with contractual relationships) was thought of as the antithesis of these.

Redfield’s dichotomy rests on a wealth of philosophical precedents. These include the gemeinschaft and gesellschaft of Tonnies and Loomis, Durkheim’s mechanical and organic solidarity, Merton’s local and cosmopolitan, Sorokin’s familialistic and contractual and the sacred and secular types of Becker. In the Australian- Bendigo, Melbourne, Murrin Bridge, Lake Cargelligo, Euabalong, Darwin, Alice Springs, and Papua New Guinean- Munari, Wewak, Vanimo, Goldie River, and other Indigenous contexts in which I have worked, the continuum proved to be too simplistic and value-oriented. As we shall see in regard to the concept of community, it does not allow for an adequate exploration of the complexities and paradoxes of community life.

In Murrin Bridge, as in most contemporary, local societies, there are elements of both ‘community’ and ‘association’, but no tidy coincidence of either within neat boundaries. For the futurist Peter Ellyard, the three big agents of change for all communities, are globalisation, tribalisation and technological change. The fieldwork and wider research reveals that all three have relevance and application for students, teachers and community.

Thus, the dichotomous model appears to me to be of limited value when conceptualising the changes taking place in Indigenous societies. Even the most urban of Indigenous societies are not large, assimilated, heterogeneous or impersonal, and so they bear little resemblance to the polar urban type. However, the power of these assimilative, urban influences on all Indigenous societies cannot be ignored, if only to remind one of Indigenous resistance to these influences. Also, in the Australian context, as Marcia Langton forcefully asserts, we need to be aware of “... the insidious ideology of seeing tribal Aborigines as the ‘real’ Aborigines and detrabalised Aborigines as losing their Aboriginality.”

Identity is an historical phenomenon and therefore is constantly open to evolution and transformation; in the contemporary period, although it may have deep roots