

The Muecke/Roe Relationship as a Model for Australian Indigenous Studies

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In *Reading the Country* Stephen Muecke describes Paddy Roe as an intellectual and relates a conversation in which Paddy, after questioning him, identifies *invisibility* as the common factor in Christian conceptions of Divinity and Bugarrigarra.¹ The enduring aspect of the Muecke-Roe relationship is its intellectuality. The relationship is intellectual - not simply reducible to the interpersonal, or a cross-cultural friendship between a Settler academic and an Aboriginal elder. And though in conversation with Stephen Muecke Paddy Roe articulates a specifically local and Aboriginal wisdom, it can be applied in surprising contexts. A consideration of the philosophical, ethical and pedagogical aspects of the teaching relationship between Muecke and Roe was of fundamental importance when envisaging the creation of an Australian Indigenous Studies undergraduate major and program as part of the University of Melbourne's New Generation Arts degree. Considerations of that relationship can lead to ever more complex understandings, though in the instance of this essay it was used to develop some simple ethical principles for a corporate work environment.

For Muecke, it involved the evolution of ways of listening and a growing sensitivity to the implicit and non-verbal forms of Roe's teaching as well as the development of a shared context for the verbal exchanges. This would seem conventional enough, but Muecke himself says in the postscript of *Reading the Country*: 'I have tried to delineate our differences rather than stress our common purpose, for there is no absolutely

common purpose, just as there is no common feature, like our humanity, which could adequately unite us for any common purpose.² The radicalism of this statement seems to challenge any possibility for learning. Friendships that bridge cultures, and the mutual recognition of similarity underlying outward difference, if not goals in themselves, are commonplace ways for Settlers to validate research relationships with Aboriginal people.

A further challenge is found in the situational nature of Paddy Roe's teaching. The manner in which he speaks to his interlocutor and directs conversation, the stories he chooses to tell and the varied way he responds to questions, is to an extent more illuminating than the obvious content. In contrast, Mowaljarlai and Neidjie, two other great Aboriginal teachers of the twentieth century, provided explicit concepts for teaching and use, in contexts removed from their immediate community. How can we learn from the Muecke-Roe relationship to the extent of turning it to the prosaic ends of developing a set of ethics for corporate governance?

Education theorist Mark Tappan's discussion of moral development in education, which uses the theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky, provides some guidance. First Tappan quotes Michael Oakeshott: 'the conditions which compose a moral practice are not theorems or precepts about human conduct, nor do they constitute anything so specific as a "shared system of values"; they compose a *vernacular language* of colloquial intercourse.'³ If we accept this 'colloquial intercourse' as applicable to the interaction of Muecke and Roe we are able to proceed to the next step of Tappan's argument when he suggests that higher mental (or moral) functioning is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse which function as 'psychological tools' that both facilitate and transform mental action. In other words, the creative richness of the manner in which Roe communicates and its perpetual qualitative dimension exercise a transformative effect for the listener, or anyone who reads the transcript of the conversation; it becomes internalised. Tappan writes that 'external speech between people becomes inner speech within people - that is, as overt, external moral dialogue becomes silent, inner moral dialogue'. This inner speech is transformed into moral understanding,

moral sensibility, and moral volition in contexts radically different from that in which they were received.⁴ (Here I would emphasise that the term ‘moral’ is being used as a synonym for ‘ethical’.)

This inner speech enabled by *Reading the Country* with its multiple authors and voices becomes the foundation for the following ideas presented to Aboriginal teaching practitioners.

Indigenous ethics in a corporate university

Value driven

In *Reading the Country* there is a black and white photograph of Paddy Roe and underneath a sentence: ‘You are looking at Paddy Roe while he is glancing to his left. Will your gazes ever meet? If they do will you recognise each other? Will this recognition be based on sameness or difference?’⁵ Novelist Teju Cole puts it this way: ‘Difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no.’⁶

A critical thing we, as Aboriginal people, face in the contemporary university is control over the institutional use of sameness and difference, that is the specificity of our Aboriginality balanced against our shared rights and responsibilities as workers and students. Though we are oppositional, and people who contest and contribute through debate and critique, we still need a vision of the future, and we certainly need a structural analysis of policy, a sense of future directions, of where things are going. How do we do things more effectively? How do we live out our varied human potentials? We spend our lives in corporations; how do we have a meaningful life within them? Here I’m going to talk about ethics and values, taking in the main as my inspiration the late Nyikina elder Paddy Roe as well as drawing on other aspects of the Aboriginal tradition.

One of the things that has always defined Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne is that it is a value-driven program. That may sound a little enigmatic but the concept has a history and you may be surprised to learn that I heard it used for the first time by John Avery, New South Wales Police Commissioner in the 1980s. When Avery was appointed Commissioner he instituted a number of reforms, including reconfiguring the NSW Police Force as

a value-driven police service.⁷ For any organisation, having values inevitably means that it will experience moments of contradiction; for the police service, it meant in practice that some things that communities might desire, or the agendas of politicians, could be inimical to those values. An instance here might be an upper-middle-class suburb where the residents would prefer that the police move on people deemed by appearance, or race, to be undesirable. Similarly, politicians might find it in their political interests to have greater or lesser rates of arrest for certain crimes. By extension one can see that having values in the contemporary university inevitably means there will be moments of contradiction, resolved through conflict, compromise or negotiation. That in itself should be recognised as a valuable contribution to institutional health.

Things must go both ways

So, a value-driven program. It was just a phrase for a number of years but has become important as we've had to respond to the rapidly changing organisational culture of the tertiary sector. The ethics modelled in Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*⁸ and in *Reading the Country* have been foundational in forming our Australian Indigenous Studies program. In many ways *Reading the Country* provided the key to thinking about the *Gularabulu* narratives and for interacting with other Aboriginal narratives, whether personal or shared publicly, in the specific context of university administration.

I realised with Paddy Roe that a lot of what he stood for was an ethical philosophy encapsulated in the phrase: 'Things must go both ways.' Stephen Muecke relates his first meeting with Paddy Roe: 'It was our first meeting and I wanted him to work with me, a first year student recording oral narratives ... When I asked him to tell me a few stories he responded by saying, "Things must go both ways." When I ask what he meant he laughed and asked if I could start by loading the corrugated iron on the truck.'⁹ This becomes the basis of a teaching and learning relationship. In comparison, Muecke noted in *Reading the Country* that (at the time of publication) the only reference to Paddy Roe found in the Australian Institute of

Aboriginal Studies' library was for *Gularabulu*, notwithstanding the fact that academics from various disciplines and public servants had collected and circulated his knowledge under their own names.

At its simplest, the concept is about equivalent exchange: our students are our clients and they pay money in exchange for teaching, that's a very basic relationship. In reality it is something much more organic where there's an interchange and development on both sides - for the teacher and the student. It's a dynamic relationship. It means openness to the possibility of a reinvention of the self, a rethinking of what we do. It's not against valid hierarchies. But it says those hierarchies should be organic, they shouldn't ossify and become points where the organisation works less effectively, where diversity is corralled, contained, fetishised.

In a reciprocal community everyone should serve and be served. What does that mean? In some cases it's straight-forward. For instance, in a work team that meets regularly, everyone takes a turn at making the coffee and tea, and cleaning up and washing cups, irrespective of seniority or gender politics. Reciprocity produces stability and a higher-order mode of communication. But 'things must go both ways' should also be dynamic. Like the yin/yang symbol, predicated on mutuality and in which each half contains the seeds of its opposite, we need the openness to a continual disclosure of new possibilities. In the following I'll discuss what I believe are some of the elements of the precept 'Things must go both ways' and their practical application.

As an example as to how this might work, consider that at the most junior level the employee is completely open to scrutiny from each level above. This scrutiny is strictly downwards - imperatives and demands on senior employees become increasingly opaque. An ethical working relationship might require that no one with management responsibility should have key performance indicators that are private. All university staff would know what their agendas are. Further, no one would receive performance bonuses for anything unless it was open to public scrutiny. Without this transparency such bonuses are the moral equivalent of secret commissions.

Respect

If reciprocity is based on exchange, respect is an enabling factor. It allows us to learn, to be open to learning what we don't know. To be disrespectful is to close ourselves down; you have to keep working it out in your own professional life. With our own practice we urge students to attend lectures out of respect for lecturers, particularly Aboriginal lecturers, and members of the community who come in and lecture. Early in 2013, Warwick Thornton spoke to some of our students about his understanding of respect in relation to some of his elders.¹⁰ Respect in this context means that if you give something, demonstrate respect in a concrete way, they might give you something back in the form of knowledge - and experience and knowledge are what they are rich in. We accordingly need to foster meaningful respect, not just politeness. For universities, policies on Indigenous issues should start with an understanding of respect rather than performative gestures.

Charity/sympathy

Gularabulu contains the exquisite story 'Yaam'. Yaam is a man who has become deranged, it seems as a result of trauma. Having lost his people, he believes that a mob of wild cattle he travels with are his tribe. The story illustrates the understanding and equally importantly the sensitivity of Paddy and other Aboriginal stockmen when they encounter Yaam, and then years later, after Yaam had passed on, the respect with which they re-inter him when they find that his grave has been disturbed. The stockmen model a conception of the individual that is non-objectifying, transcending narrow economist conceptions of humanity.

If this is an example of sympathy, we find examples of charity in Paddy Roe's interactions, his accepting that people will make mistakes and when necessary correcting them gently. In one recorded instance he's sitting with a friend, Franz Hoogland, and in passing he's mentioned *liyan*, an intuitive faculty which is located in the solar plexus.¹¹ Intrigued and interested, Franz says to Paddy: 'How do I develop that *liyan*?' Paddy looks down, pauses, his face veiled by his hat, he coughs gently and then he says: 'That's the hard one, we got to teach 'im.' He doesn't say: 'You can't ask in that way, you're not in a

position to ask that. Because you've asked that question I can't teach you.' He defers the question and a direct answer until the moment it might be asked in the appropriate manner, in the right context, and properly answered. In some ways this is the highest level of communication and teaching.

Prudence

One of Paddy Roe's most surprising teaching concepts is that of prudence. (It should be noted that prudence is the principal of the four cardinal virtues of classical philosophy and scholastic theology. The others being justice, fortitude, and temperance.) It is still one I'm trying to understand, but we are looking at each of the elements of the philosophy of Paddy Roe, as we understand them, and as they relate to workplace practice. To be prudent, I think, is to be aware of what's happening around you, sometimes avoiding conflict in order to conserve energy and maintain focus on the essential. Discussing the intuitive faculty *liyan* with Franz Hoogland, Paddy Roe gives an example of how walking through the bush it could manifest as an awareness that something was not right and a precautionary avoidance implemented: 'Might be someone waiting with spear, we better go this way.'

In 'Donkey Devil, Story II' Paddy takes his spear and tomahawk when asked to investigate an apparently demonic creature even though he appears sceptical when told the story of the encounter with a strange creature. Here there is an awareness of possibilities implicit in his investigation, innocuous as it seems. Implementing prudence in the corporate workplace we try to consider events, and the consequences of actions, from multiple perspectives and keep in mind that there are aspects of people or situations that exceed our observations or experience. A heavier burden, but one in which prudence is a protective discipline for Aboriginal people, is the intention not to be provoked, not to act instinctively in the face of culturally disrespectful acts encountered in the workplace. Without prudence one's whole project is jeopardised.

Protocols

If we believe people have inherent value, how do we recognise this in corporations? Corporations can do this

as an abstraction. But we do need operative protocols and Aboriginal culture can provide models.

Now I want to extend this into the notion of what it might mean in terms of community. Whether we like it or not we live in communities. And for better or worse we are in the university community. I think for these purposes we should see community as not just a group of friends but rather a group of people who are brought together because they have some shared interest or purpose. With that comes the question, what can we learn from Aboriginal culture with respect to protocols? And once again I'd like these protocols to be seen as operative protocols. They provide guidance, allow us to behave in the most appropriate manner if we don't have necessary social knowledge or are limited by our own psychology or personality. They can open up possibilities for communication as well as acknowledge and protect sensitivities. Protocols can make interactions less awkward and violent. They can deal with issues that are going to affect everyone. What if a colleague dies suddenly? How is that recognised? How are the feelings of the colleagues who may have been close to the deceased respected? When is it appropriate for someone to move into their office? Sit at their desk? When should their photographs and personal information be removed from web pages? Who will ensure that this happens? A corporation usually doesn't have policies on any of this. It's left up to the judgement and initiative of individuals and of course this is where barbarisms can occur. It's really about manners, and if we're looking at Australian Indigenous studies one of the things that we should be trying to do is civilise the people we work with.

Shame

There are three ways this term was used in Aboriginal communities. First, someone might use it as a description of self-consciousness and social unease: 'I'm ashamed (or I'm "shame")'. When Aboriginal and white people lived in separated communities, social interactions with white people could produce this feeling of unease. People might also feel it if undue prominence was given to them at the expense of family or community. The other sense is when it's said directly to someone to 'growl' them, to express disapproval of their

behaviour, 'shame!'. Similarly, it might be used in conversation to pass judgement on someone's behaviour and to affirm accepted norms. The term 'shame job' might be used. (This judgement is often expressed in tones of mild amusement rather than censoriousness.) Both these usages proceed on the assumption that someone is being rebuked because they are a member of a community; or that a judgement is being expressed because it involves a community member and intact social relationships and responsibilities.

The gravest use of the concept of shame is shame at someone's shamelessness. In this instance, the person who uses it takes on the shame of the perpetrator. Mrs Ellen Draper, in writing down the story of the Myall Creek Massacre for publication, says that the story of the massacre had never been written down before by Aboriginal people because the shame of it prevented its re-telling outside the small Aboriginal circles in which it was traditionally told.¹² The Aboriginal people who are the custodians of the story feel shame but the shame is for the behaviour of the massacre perpetrators. In this case the shameful act has not estranged the perpetrator from the community but rather from humanity. It's a cautionary tale for the powerful, those who overturn accepted standards in pursuing their ends. This is shame as an absolute limit and this is the worst possible outcome for an organisation.

Community

While the corporate governance works on a system of reward and punishment and the sometimes unhelpful individualisation of its workers, there may still be the possibility for individual units to do the opposite by practising communal responsibility. Where there is a failure or a fault the whole system should be analysed, and that will take into account attitudes modelled by senior staff, peer group cultures as well as individual responsibility. The parallel here is with the management technique of root cause analysis which is designed to find why a failure occurred as well as how it occurred.

An illustrative story I heard once involved a remote Aboriginal community where a non-Aboriginal visitor was found alone late at night with a young woman who was about to marry one of her own community. Nothing had happened

but an immediate court was convened at which all community members were present. After violent and frightening expressions of anger a surprising change occurred after some time, as individual community members rose and publicly held themselves to account for their role in creating the situation, in some cases accusing themselves along the lines of 'I'm her uncle and I should have taken better care of her'. This is a sophisticated method of identifying the complex causes of behaviour.

While we are talking about communities and community responsibility, one of the things that we do in ours is make it clear that we don't blame people for failing or having problems, but the one mistake we take seriously is hiding a problem and not seeking communal support or advice. We own the problem with the individual. Now that contradicts the system we've identified where people are individualised and given individual rewards and punishments, dispersed and set against each other. In that system there can be no communal responsibility.

Justice

Finally, an Aboriginal responsibility is the willingness to execute justice when necessary. Not everyone needs to execute this responsibility but it is a communal one. Now, I've talked of charity, sympathy in relation to people and the acceptance of mistakes. In almost all instances failures and shortcomings should remain private, but sometimes private justice can mean public injustice. In some instances justice and retribution is sought publicly, not in the crude sense of shaming someone but because to learn from it, and prevent its recurrence, the offender and the offence need to be brought into independent, objective frameworks of power.

The *Reading the Country* narrative 'We Better Go Back to Country' tells the story of when Paddy eloped with another man's wife and returns to Broome to make amends and re-establish his relationship with community and, more fundamentally, tradition and country.

I gotta go to Broome I gotta -
 I gotta make all these people -
 square' -
 you know 'cos I -

pinched his woman from somebody -
so I gotta make all this fellas I gotta make them clear -¹³

Back in Broome he presents himself with a spear to the wronged man who takes his revenge but afterward embraces Roe and affirms him and his new family.

no bad friend nothing -
he just leave-im be -¹⁴

Here I have identified how *Reading the Country*, and its central relationship between Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, can help establish a Value Driven program, where Things Must Go Both Ways and the principles of Respect, Charity/Sympathy, Prudence, Protocols, Shame, Community and Justice can operate to mobilise Indigenous Ethics in a corporate university.

Notes

- 1 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, pp. 169-70, 173.
- 2 Ibid, p. 230.
- 3 Mark B. Tappan, 'Moral Education in the Zone of Proximal Development' *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1998, p. 147 (italics in original).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 16.
- 6 Teju Cole, *Open City*, Faber, London, 2012, pp. 104-5.
- 7 The change of name from Force to Service is noteworthy. It has since been renamed the NSW Police Force. See John Avery, *Police, Force or Service?*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1981.
- 8 Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, ed. Stephen Muecke, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.
- 9 Stephen Muecke, 'Towards the Centre', *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, p. 66.
- 10 Australian Indigenous film director, screenwriter and cinematographer, director of *Samson and Delilah*, 2009.
- 11 Richard Meech and Michael Grant, dirs, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, A Biniman Productions Ltd, Adrian Malone Productions Ltd, KCET, Los Angeles and BBC-TV in association with The Global Television Network, 1992.
- 12 Ellen Draper, 'Old Cobraboor', in *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writing*, ed. Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin and Adam Shoemaker, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane., 1990, pp. 90-103.
- 13 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 137.
- 14 Ibid., p. 139.