

# Mamarapha: Teaching indigenous adults

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### Introduction

Mamarapha commenced as a tertiary level initiative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries (ATSIM). Now in its 12th year of operation, the College offers a cluster of courses: pastoral ministry training for indigenous ministers; ministry studies and health promotion studies for church members and lay ministers. The courses extend from certificate level to a four year Advanced Diploma.<sup>1</sup> The College, operated by the SDA Church, employs three full-time teaching faculty members and a registrar, complemented by sessional and guest lecturers, to cover the wide scope of subjects. These range from biblical studies, ministry, and evangelism, to home and family studies, human relationships, and life skills; as well as health, and literacy and computing skills, among others.

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Teaching at Mamarapha is a great privilege, but poses some unique challenges. Indigenous people are ordinary people, who share a common humanity and potential for learning with all other people groups. While some may seem to lack literacy and financial skills, they have other specialised knowledge and skills—desert survival, bush tucker, bush medicine, non-verbal communication, understanding of kinship relationships, for example. These are almost unknown in the non-indigenous population.

Aboriginal people do not comprise a single entity. Europeans trace their origins to many different ethnic backgrounds, nations and cultures; so Aboriginal people come from different tribes or clans. These are grouped under the broad categories of Murriss in Queensland, Kooris in NSW, Mardu, Wongai, Yamadgi and Noongyars in WA; there are also the Torres Strait Islanders. Originally, there were over 200 Aboriginal languages—and hence cultures, across Australia. Modern urbanisation has added an extra dimension to Aboriginal culture. Many urban indigenous people, however, have only a scant knowledge of their ancient culture and heritage.

Teaching at Mamarapha presents some great privileges as well as challenges. Most of our

students are mature adults, and come with a thirst for Bible knowledge and a sincere desire for a closer walk with God. As adults, they bring with them their own life experiences and, perhaps, the slower but more reflective learning of older and wiser heads that challenges teachers to translate abstract concepts and theory into everyday practical life, using language and terminology that is easily understood—i.e. it is not exclusively mono-cultural. Engaging in adult learning or andragogy<sup>2</sup>, *vis a vis* pedagogy, may be more in harmony with traditional indigenous learning, but it still requires students to make considerable personal adjustments, particularly for indigenous students who come to a new environment, such as Mamarapha, from isolated communities.

I would like to invite the reader on a ‘journey’ to consider some interesting ‘cultural frames’ that indigenous students bring to their education. Understanding these is essential for effectively teaching indigenous people. The ‘journey’ also helps to make sense of our *modus operandi*.

### Time orientation

‘Blackfella time’ is a commonly used term. It reflects the concept of time being a quality more than a quantity, a servant rather than a master. With Aboriginal people, along with many other cultures, the event is more important than the time at which it occurs. Thus class attendance is a desirable option, but other priorities may take precedence, such as funerals, family requests, pension day, or shopping. However, rather than using the terms *blackfella* / *whitefella time*, it may be more fitting to consider the concept as *city* or *country time*.

Subsistence hunter-gatherer economies have little need for future planning, so the idea of thinking and planning ahead is limited. Cultural attitudes to time are absorbed from the family and the social

### Mamarapha

A combination of words from Aboriginal languages of the Western Desert Region and Ancient Hebrew, meaning **God makes whole**.

environment, and this, combined with the obligations that family may bring, make any kind of planning difficult—whether it is budgeting income, meeting deadlines, managing time, planning for assignments, or preparing for an exam.

## Eye contact

Aboriginal people have often been accused of being guilty of some misconduct because they would not look someone in the face. What is not readily understood is the fact that some Aboriginal cultures show respect by looking down rather than ‘staring’ someone in the face. For others, it is a sign of uncertainty or shame; you only look someone in the face when you want to show aggression. Looking into someone’s face—particularly a white face—often will not occur until a strong bond of trust is built.

When talking with Aboriginal people, many whites have to remind themselves not to stare into their eyes, and not to misinterpret their looking down.

## Asking questions

‘Smart’ people in many Aboriginal cultures, are those who can find out what they want to know, not by asking questions but by observing closely and by reading non-verbal cues. This poses an immediate problem for the classroom, where much of the learning is conducted through question and answer.

Fortunately, most Aboriginals are generous to ‘ignorant whites’ who must ask questions. We have found that most urban Aboriginals respond well to classroom questions, but with desert people, greater sensitivity must be used. Singling out shy students for answers or tasks is best left until they are comfortable with the lecturer. Particularly with first year students, small-group questions are generally better than personal questions, for they

reduce the risk of ‘shaming’ someone who may not know the answer. Group discussions and tasks can work well, for we have found more cooperation than competition among our students.

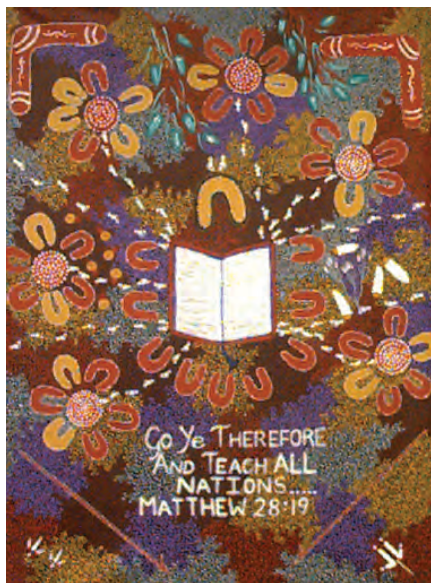
When asking questions, teaching faculty must be aware that an answer given—particularly on sensitive issues—may primarily reflect what students think the lecturer wants, or the answer may merely convey a hint of the ‘real answer’. A “yes” answer sometimes means “no”, if the “yes” is seen to please or will satisfy the questioner. While this appears ‘untruthful’ in many western cultures, good manners are often valued above candidness or transparency regarding what one thinks or believes.

## Learning

For most indigenous people, practical, hands-on learning (or learning by doing) is the best way to learn. Performing the skill, exercise, or process with students, and discussing the steps and processes is very effective and helps them to perform it themselves. This not only fits in with traditional learning styles, but also minimises literacy difficulties and classroom learning obstacles.

Storytelling is another important tool; particularly stories that students can relate to. It is easy to assume that adult students come with high motivation and good self-directed learning skills. Such an assumption, however, ignores that many Aboriginal adults bring ‘instructional packages’ with them from their schooling days that are educational ‘nightmares’. Thus, holistic learning that integrates the content material with the rest of life, makes learning meaningful and can begin to break down negative classroom images they have built up in the past. Encouragement is a very important tool for those who come from a background that is a collage

“Some Aboriginal cultures show respect by looking down rather than ‘staring’ someone in the face”



1 Banner painted by John and Annette Beck, with 1997 students and staff

2 Mamarapha College group 2008

3 Mamarapha teaching staff: (L-R) Michael Steed, Lynelda Tippo and Gordon Stafford

[Photography: Mamarapha collection]

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	3

of failure, non-achievement, inferiority and scholastic non-performance.

Abstract concepts seem particularly difficult to master. For example, a lecturer may give the theory on sermon preparation—outlining, laying out notes, and so on, but it is when the class goes through the process together on the board—gathering ideas, formulating a structure, identifying key concepts, grouping ideas, looking for illustrations, etc. that the material begins to make sense.

The visual aspect of learning seems to be crucial—symbols, diagrams, charts, models, and so on. Thus, even the concept of layout in sermon outlines seems to be grasped quickest when the notes are on computer, and the lecturer can then go through the material with the student—breaking it into ‘visual sections’, adding sub-headings, indenting, highlighting, and bolding.

It can be readily seen that patience is also a very important component for indigenous learning. Many of our students initially find the classroom daunting and scary, as their education has been sketchy, their learning styles are different and, for some, English is a second language and often not understood very well. We have found it essential to be aware of the language that is used—explaining ‘big’ words, speaking simply and clearly, together with examples from everyday life. We must mentor students through regularly reminding them about assignments, frequently checking work and monitoring their progress, to ensure they are on the right track.

## Relationships

The quality of learning among Aboriginal people is related to the personal interest and rapport that teachers build with their students. Aboriginal children have sometimes defined a good teacher as “someone who likes us and is fair,” and that goes for adults as well. Induction, at the beginning of the course, begins with staff introducing themselves to the students and giving them a brief rundown on who they are; their background, family and so on. A good relationship with students at Mamarapha enhances learning and growth, encourages openness and fosters academic excellence.

Effective listening is probably the most important part of building relationships among indigenous people. Many are shy and reserved because, so often, they have felt put down or ignored by insensitive or ‘ignorant whites’. The desert way of life is much slower than the 21<sup>st</sup> century urban rush. Consequently, it is essential for lecturers to adjust their delivery to accommodate a slower pace of thinking and talking, for effective student learning and relationships.

## Decision making

Decision making usually has more to do with everyday life than the classroom; it cannot be

divorced from learning. Whereas decision making among western cultures tends to be linear, Aboriginal decision making tends to be contextual. Decisions are made within the framework of the present circumstances, the family and friends. If these change, then the decision may change.

One of the primary reasons may lie in the value that is placed on family relationships. For many Aboriginal people, the family is the unit that makes the important decisions, particularly in matters of marriage and death. The family includes aunts, uncles, cousins and other extended relatives. Any member who disregards a family decision does so at the risk of alienation or some form of censure or reprisal from other family members.

Hence, a student may decide to pursue a course of study, but then not turn up. This may eventuate when a funeral occurs; a family member needs help, or some other circumstance changes, even though all the arrangements for the study program may be in place.

While Western cultures value individualism and independence, Aboriginal cultures tend to prize family solidarity and respect for older family members.

## Spirituality

Perhaps one characteristic of Aboriginal people that makes teaching at Mamarapha so enjoyable is their spirituality. In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, the supernatural is a crucial element, and spirituality is almost universal. In addition, most of the students that come to Mamarapha come with a desire to improve their spiritual experience, as well as their Bible knowledge. This makes the aim of helping students to find Christ so much easier, and seeing students grasp the Gospel and integrate it into their personal lives makes all the difficulties worthwhile.

## A final thought

I have tried to describe the cultural context of how we learn and teach at Mamarapha. It is both a privilege and responsibility to guide students in their quest for God and an inspiration to watch them growing spiritually as well as academically.

Recently, one of the first year students prayed at the beginning of class. In his prayer, he said: “Lord, this is the sweetest pasture I have ever been in!” For me, that one sentence made all the difficulties, challenges, and even some heart aches well worthwhile. **TEACH**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These are nationally accredited courses; Mamarapha is a Registered Training Organisation registered in WA with the Department of Education and Training.

<sup>2</sup> A term usually connected with Malcolm Knowles, the long-time doyen of adult education.

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