Common Units: politics and rhetoric

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Salutations, acknowledgements to traditional owners, and visitors from USA.

It is a privilege and honour to be asked onto the same platform as Veronica Arbon and Dana Ober to speak to issues of Indigenous education. As a non-Indigenous educator I feel much more comfortable theorising about my own forms of education - non-Indigenous education. Anyway here goes.

Today's forum is concerned with the Indigenous Mind courses, however I have been asked to say something about the Common Units and especially why oratory or rhetoric has been chosen as an underpinning framework for the Common Units. I am assuming this is because the Common units are seen as a sort of precursor pointing in the general direction which Indigenous Mind will take up more seriously.

I will organise what I have to say under three headings: first, Batchelor as both ways; second, Why Common units? third, Why rhetoric?

In the first section—Batchelor as both ways—I describe Batchelor Institute as an institute committed to resisting the mainstream and its rush to a globalised Disneyland, as an institution always searching for ways to find eddies, backwaters or lee shores in which it is possible to move back upstream to strengthen the sources of Indigenous life in Australia. Batchelor has a long history of searching out these opportunities; unfortunately the history or histories of Batchelor are yet to be written. I say histories because of course it matters whether you are looking upstream at Batchelor or downstream. What to some is seen as moving into the mainstream is interpreted by others as drifting off into oblivion.

The second section—why common units?—will sketch some underpinning arguments for the common units. I will also outline my hopes for the final shape of the Common Units as a fully coherent sequence stretching from the point of entry of students into higher education right through to their final year, even into postgraduate studies. Basically, the argument for the common units is that there is a common core of knowledge and attributes that Indigenous students need to negotiate and share *as Indigenous students*, irrespective of which specific course, field of study or vocation they are engaged in. This core that is common to all Batchelor students because they share 'indigeneity' does not assume they share some specific essence of language or culture or genetics or whatever. In fact because of colonisation, it might be more appropriate to point, not so much to a common past as to a common future, to a hope that is shared and common to all Indigenous peoples, a hope aimed at justice, a hope aimed at cultural renewal and strengthening, a hope aimed at what Mick Dodson calls a decent life.

On this reading, what Indigenous students share is the effects and pain of colonisation and what they need Batchelor to help them with is to develop, in collaboration with other students, the political will to enter the struggle to decolonise themselves, their communities, professions, workplaces, their nations and the nation generally. In short, the argument for the common units is that Indigenous professionals or academics cannot simply melt into the crowd and define themselves only in terms of their field of work or their field of study. Indigenous professionals and academics are condemned to become public intellectuals, what Gramsci calls organic intellectuals. For Indigenous intellectuals, to avoid or evade the voices of public life is to deny your identity as an Indigenous person.

But struggling against colonisation and injustice is not something you can do on your own. It requires people power. This, in essence, is the line of argument justifying the common units.

The third section—Why rhetoric?—will explain why the common units are being designed within a rhetorical framework, rather than a straight academic skills framework, or a straight English literacy framework. To foreshadow the line of argument here: rhetoric was and is the study and training of orators, and oratory is a special kind of public performance where someone, usually a leader, tries to both acknowledge the diversity or divisions within a community yet through the persuasive power of their speech tries to bring that community together into one mind. Perhaps in celebration of the heroes, stories, values underpinning their community and way of life. Perhaps to negotiate and come to agreement on a way forward. Perhaps to settle on how something or someone is to be judged morally or politically. So, rhetoric is the education used by non-nation states to train up their leaders, leaders who use a persuasion based on reasoned speech, not the persuasion of violence, bribery or manipulation. The sweet reason of persuasion not the sour aftertaste of police batons.

The common units are intended to encourage and equip Indigenous students at Batchelor to engage in this common struggle for a better life for Indigenous peoples *as a common struggle,* as a struggle in common, a struggle that is publicly shared, a struggle in which I know that you know that I know that you know that we all know that we are all supporting each of us to achieve a common good for all of us. The common units are focused on this common good, on what is good for the whole, on what binds us together and supports us as a community of hope, not just a community of memory, a community that stretches from one end of Australia to the other end, a community that even includes our brothers and sisters here visiting us from another continent, and even beyond to include the colonists and their offspring such as myself, a community that includes the whole of nature—animals, birds and the spirits associated with the places we are responsible for.

A. Batchelor as both ways

And so I come to my first section: Batchelor as both ways. As we all know Indigenous people have bestowed on Batchelor Institute a special word, a word that expresses a concept and a task. That word, that concept, that task is both ways. And as we also all know, no-one can easily say in a word what both ways is, nor when something is both ways and when it's not. This is because both ways is what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a 'god term', a term that we use for judging everything else. God terms are essentially contested—there is always discussion and argument about how to define them. In fact god terms are also dialectical: this means that they keep changing. Just because both ways means this *here now* does not mean that it will still mean the same tomorrow or somewhere else. What is both ways has to be worked out anew each and every time. If we are ever tempted to think we have managed to nail both ways down, that simply proves we have nailed ourselves down—and both ways has quietly slipped out the door behind us.

Both ways is a term that can only be defined in terms of what is happening around, what has happened before, what is possible, and who is available to act or help. Both ways is an ethical term: wise people have more insight into it; practical people have more insight into it; and finally as an Indigenous term, Indigenous people have more insight into it.

And so, given that I am neither wise, nor practical, nor Indigenous I hereby absolve myself from the task of defining both ways. Instead I will simply gesture towards a few features that might be used to characterise it. Both ways means, obviously: 'There is not just one way'. In a colonial situation both ways means 'We have a way too! Your's isn't the only way!'. Both ways means finding a balance when things have got out of balance. In a colonial situation both ways means: 'Things are out of balance here. You are killing us and our way of life; Back off!' It means: 'We are getting sucked in here! We need to decolonise our minds and strengthen our Indigenous ways of knowing

and living'. It means: 'Let's resist the flow down towards the mainstream and work our way back upstream closer the sources of our way of life. There we will become stronger.'

This concept of both ways is an injunction to redress the imbalance and find a new balance that enables students to appropriate White knowledge whilst keeping strong in 'Indigenous mind' and being careful not to drift unwittingly or unthinkingly into 'white mind' as Dana puts it.

B. Why common units?

I now come to the second part of this speech which deals with the question: why common units?

As I have already foreshadowed in the Introduction the argument for the Common units is the argument that educated Indigenous people have social and political responsibilities whether they like it or not. Members of minority groups and other groups who have been subjected to unjust social conditions may perhaps be able to escape as individuals or individual families by using education as a mechanism for social climbing. But I don't think it an exaggeration to say that this option is not available to Indigenous people except by denying or alienating themselves from their Indigenous identity and sense of connection to Indigenous people and realities.

For over 200 years in this country and longer in others, Indigenous people have made it clear to themselves and to others that they intend to continue as Indigenous people till the end of time. Nothing bar genocide will divert them from this task and responsibility. But of course it is this very refusal that is such a scandal to modern liberals who believe that 'we should all become the same'. We should leave behind our cultures, religions, genders and so on - or at least confine them to the privacy of our own homes and local communities. According to this underpinning assumption that is shared by all sides of politics in modern life and theory, we are all the same, all just citizens, all just human beings when it comes to the public worlds of work, administration, governance, law and the principles, methodologies and ethics of knowledge, research and scholarship. Privately you can keep your identity, but publicly no!

Well, this expectation and presumption that underpins much modern social and political life is precisely what Indigenous people cannot and will not assimilate to. Their argument is simple: we already had a public life, a life of law, a life of morality, a constitution if you will, long before the modern nation state came along and imposed itself on us. These were embedded into the very fabric of our social and political lives. And we are still living in continuity with these ancient constitutions no matter what the judges of the Yorta Yorta case may think.

What this adds up to educationally for Batchelor, for the argument for the Common Units, is this: whenever an Indigenous person is engaged in advanced studies in a profession or vocation or academic discipline, there is always that extra edge to their studies, the edge that is there precisely because they are Indigenous. And it is precisely because their studies always carry this extra edge that there is a subliminal dialectic, a deeper encounter taking place, a dialectic between temptation and rejection, attraction and loathing, assimilation and resistance. It is this deeper battle that needs to be brought into the open, needs to become visible, so that all can see it and engage with it. This action of bringing the hidden subtext of colonisation and decolonisation of Indigenous Mind and ways of life into the light is the task of the common Units. My sense is that the task of Indigenous Mind is far more radical: it is to gather together strategies for practically and theoretically tipping the balance within this encounter back towards decolonisation of mind with all that that entails in terms of reinvesting more strongly in language, culture, land, education, ceremonies, stories and so on.

The argument for common units can be made in a number of ways. So far I have used a variation of the traditional Socratic argument that there is more to being a good person than being good at your

job or your discipline. More important is what you are morally, ethically, politically. And furthermore to even do your job or studies properly calls on these larger moral and ethical attributes. This was of course the underlying argument for the Liberal Arts curriculum in traditional Europe, which was based on the Trivium—the three language arts of: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. Students had to study this language-based Trivium before they could move on to their professional studies in the Quadrivium. First cultural training, then professional training. In the Trivium students were cultivated into the ethical and political ideals of their culture and community through a training in grammar which included a study of the stories, literature and orature; dialectic trained them in how to persuade and dissuade people through arguments and finally rhetoric trained them in how to use language to bring people together into one mind. All this needed to be studied before students could take up their vocational and professional studies.

Another way to understand the common units is through the metaphor of common ground. The common units are both ways in that they seek to establish a level playing field, a common ground on which everyone can display who they are, what their deepest values are, what they want to say to the assembled audience in all its diversity and difference, an audience that despite all this diversity and difference is Indigenous. The common units thus open up a space and kinds of speaking through which Indigenous students can show forth their understanding of what it means to be Indigenous and learn from others what being Indigenous means to them. In this way students must confront the question in what way are we all Indigenous, how is being Indigenous more than just my relationship to land, family, language or culture? How are we all related? Is it this very place of speech and the speech within it that relates us? Is our relationship a relationship created and sustained by speaking publicly before one another? In this way the common units and the kind of speech, the kind of oratory they foster, signifies the potential for a genuinely Aboriginal republic over and above the diverse Indigenous nations of the past. In this sense the speeches prefigure a possible social reality. It is the speeches themselves and the way they address and draw together Indigenous people from all walks and ways of life that creates for a short time a sense, a hint, even the elusive experience of an Indigenous public sphere. Here is a case where discourse gestures towards, even creates for a fleeting moment, a new social reality—not simply reflects or represents an existing one.

This special kind of speech creates a special kind of social reality, a reality of many names. On the European side it has been called 'the polis', 'the republic', 'the people', or 'the public sphere'. Unfortunately, on the European side this social reality has been interpreted to mean that people should leave aside their prior identities as women or refugees or Yolngu or Saibai or Walpiri and become simply citizens. But public spaces do not have to be interpreted as beyond all culture and identity; and in fact of course all public spaces do in fact secretly align themselves with one culture, one language or another. Even the United States and France which pride themselves on their rejection of prior cultural or religious constraints on the freedom of individuals, even they, are just as nationalist and just as chauvinist as other nation states. Think of the way that George W Bush and John Howard are whipping up and using an 'us-versus-them', *us* who fight for lawful freedom versus *them* who fight on behalf of lawless terror.

By contrast the sense of community fostered by the kinds of performative speech constituting and creating the Common Units as a meeting place of experiences, histories, cultures and languages is overwhelmingly inclusive. Inclusive but Indigenous. The Common Units look to the mobilisation of a common sense of community, sense of belonging, sense of connectedness, between all Indigenous peoples. Extending that sense to non-Indigenous peoples is I would argue a later task. First things first. Anyway, as there are no non-Indigenous students at Batchelor it is a question that does not really arise except it does shift the burden of argument regarding the involvement of non-

Indigenous lecturers. Which is a reason why the staffing of Common units should be predominately Indigenous, and Indigenous in a way that truly reflects the full spectrum of Indigenous life and Indigenous mind.

So far I have argued that the common units are designed to create people power, the feeling of power that arises from publicly shared emotions and agreement, a sense of power focused on the underlying issues of identity, assimilation, sovereignty, justice, colonisation and so on. Big picture issues, political issues, philosophical issues, existential issues, issues of life and death. Issues that are always at work in behind every other issue. Issues that won't go away. Issues that are a constant subtext in all Indigenous life.

This subtext in people's hearts and desires can seem merely private or idiosyncratic. But this inner struggle reflects an outer struggle, the struggle between two ways of life, two socio-political systems. Hidden struggles of the heart are the very same struggles that are tucked invisibly in behind the headlines and the seemingly random events of social life. To heal or strengthen the heart means to heal or strengthen social life, political institutions and practico-theoretical insight that we need into the underbelly of colonialism and its aftermath. To get beyond what Friere calls a culture of silence which is a condition most colonised people at time feel, we must learn to read the world, not just read the word. People need to find their voice. The common units are intended to create a common place, a place where these different voices can speak and be heard, a place that is public and open to all in which each and all can listen and speak to each and all. A place of copresence created by speech, by the kind of speech spoken and heard in this space. By the gods, spirits and heroes celebrated and given voice in the workshop, values drawn from the Draft Declaration on Indigenous human rights, the spirit of social justice, courage and determination, the voices of past Indigenous leaders, orators, and heroes, the spirit of place, of story, of history, of experience, of language, of culture, and of self brought into the shared space of the common units by students themselves.

C. The role of Rhetoric in Common Units

But how does rhetoric enter this picture? Why is rhetoric or oratory implicated in the Common Units? And so this brings me to my third and final segment of this talk: why rhetoric?

I have described the way that the Common Units fosters a special kind of discourse, a special kind of performative speech, the speech of political leadership, a form of speech designed to form public opinion into a common deeper understanding of itself, of its commitments, and of the factors defining the current situation together with its opportunities and dangers. This form of discourse, let's call it political oratory, is among the most highly prized attributes. Almost all societies possess highly structured and extensive learning paths for producing powerful orators, all societies try to ensure that their leaders are powerful orators. Even so-called literate societies, prize oratory highly. (Sometimes this can be difficult: witness the problems of George W as an orator).

Rhetoric is the education of orators, of people who can engage in that special kind of performative speech that calls a community to one mind. Probably, only the role of priest, ceremonial leader or the like would rival it in status. Because of its importance, its inherent powers of persuasion for good or bad, its power to lead the community along the right path or down a wrong track, societies have highly developed pedagogies for handing on the powers of oratory. For example, for 2300 years the secondary and university education systems of Europe and the Middle East were dominated by rhetoric as the study and training in oratory. In fact the whole education system converges on producing orators who are highly skilled in their mastery of language and all its ways, deeply attuned to the traditions, the stories, the texts and themes of their culture, ethically mature

and responsible, and politically astute, insightful and committed to justice, not simply the advancement of their own interests.

If I had more time -say about 5 years—I would try to prove to you that the entire range of human sciences including the linguistics sciences, the social sciences, the legal sciences, the managerial sciences, even the psychological sciences and the historical sciences, as well as of course the poetic and literary fields, all these fields of study, what have since become separate seemingly self-contained academic disciplines, all these fields had as their original motivating practical context, the need to develop the self-conscious concepts, knowledge and practices that could be deliberately deployed in the training and education of orators. In order to ensure a supply of good orators and leaders, and rather than simply rely on the laws of supply and demand as we do now, most societies developed a systematic body of knowledge that could enable an orator to speak to and for the whole culture and community in all its diversity and speak with wisdom, knowledge, insight, wit, emotion, power and persuasion. The very survival of communities depends on the integrity and quality of their orators.

It might occur to you that a focus on performative speech could result in a lack of attention to literacy. Let me assure you that the skills of oratory underpin the skills of writing. In fact the grammar of writing is a simplification of the grammar of oratory. The grammar of oratory is far richer and far more intricate than the grammar of writing. Even so, at the most basic level, the principles at work in a written text are the same as those in oratory. The reason for the common view that the grammar of writing is radically different and more complicated that the grammar of speech is that the sort of speech in question in this comparison is what is called casual conversation, not the highly stylised oral performance of oratory. Apples are being compared with oranges. When we compare oratory and writing we get a whole different story.

So much for the theoretical relationship between speech as oratory and writing. Personally I have to say that, as someone who has been a literacy teacher helping 'second change' students from the wrong side of the tracks to master the language and conceptual skills needed in higher education for most of my adult life, given this there is no way that I could in conscience allow a focus on Indigenous perspective detract from the need to master the dominant discourses and language at work in our colonial world. For me this has been the special and exciting challenge of the Common Units, and it will be an even bigger challenge with Indigenous Mind. But what we are finding is that in fact there is no conflict between developing the powers of oratory and the powers of literacy. In fact my view is that oratory provides a most motivating context for engaging with language in all its aspects - both oral and literate. In fact our experience with the Common Units is leading us to the conclusion that the best way to assist adult Indigenous students with their literacy is to teach them rhetoric and insist that they perform their texts as acts of oratory. If you really want to improve literacy, from our experience so far we would say to you: teach rhetoric and you will capture most of the elements of academic literacy. The main thing you won't cover is the specialist jargon or technical concepts that are peculiar to each specific field of professional practice and its corresponding academic field. So, you can rest assured, both the Common Units and Indigenous Mind provide rich and powerfully motivating contexts for the development of high level language and literacy skills.

1. Conclusion

This brings me to the end of this speech. If you were to ask me where is all this headed? Where are the Common Units and Indigenous Mind taking us? I would at this point answer something like this: the road we are heading out on is a road towards more Indigenous control, more Indigenous content, more Indigenous forms of showing, expressing, communicating and negotiating

understandings and knowledges. This is the side of Batchelor that needs to be strengthened if Batchelor is to continue as a unique institution claiming a special relationship of responsibility and rapport with Indigenous peoples of Australia. The Common Units and Indigenous Mind are two new attempts to effect that rebalancing called both ways. This effort to redress the imbalance within the polity of the Australian cultural, social, political, intellectual and spiritual landscape, an imbalance that is reflected within Batchelor itself, is already being addressed right across Batchelor as an institution. The Common Units and Indigenous Mind are simply hoping to add their new efforts to this ongoing struggle.

Personally, my hopes for the body of intellectual work that will be generated by the Common Units and Indigenous Mind as contexts of Indigenous intellectual practice are twofold. I hope that this intellectual work at Batchelor can develop deep and strong intellectual and personal connections with the work of other Indigenous scholars and academics who are also grappling with Indigenous intellectual ideas in universities here and overseas. I also hope that the work here at Batchelor can connect with the emergent work of Indigenous knowledge and language experts in remote communities who are beginning to gather their knowledges and cultures into 'Knowledge Centres' in order to protect and hold them for future generations. It may be that graduates of these courses, especially the Indigenous Mind course, can participate in this absolutely vital task. If Batchelor could position itself as mediating between cultural workers in remote communities and cultural workers in universities, it would be fulfilling a vital function, especially if its graduates begin to form social and intellectual networks, the connecting tissue, between all three environments.

So, I will leave you with two visions. In terms of the common units it is a vision of indigenous professionals who no matter where they work or where their work or studies take them, they always keep in mind their personal, ethical and political connections to the wider situation of Indigenous peoples in the polity of Australia, which continues to be a colonial society despite all the talk about 'postcolonialism'. This vision is attached to the sort of graduates we would wish to foster through a full, coherent and systematic sequence of common units across all higher education studies. The second vision is associated with the Indigenous Mind course we are setting out to design. This vision is of a world of Indigenous ideas circulating throughout Australia and beyond, yet always in the hands of Indigenous intellectuals who are deeply alert to the responsibilities and dangers of working within and for Indigenous Mind.

Thank you. It has been a privilege and honour to speak about these matters.