



Confident engagement with other cultures

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In his book *Is Australia an Asian Country? Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?*, Stephen Fitzgerald has rightly argued that '[u]ntil quite recently ... our education from kindergarten to the end of university assumed that there was but one world of learning, one universe of intellectual activity ... and that was the world of Europe and its derivatives'.

The reality of globalisation the rise of multinational companies larger than many nation-states, and trans-national political entities such as the European Community or the emerging Asia-Pacific bloc means that in the future, Australians will interact far more with people from an even wider range of cultural traditions.

Given Australia's cultural diversity, our (relatively recent) history of racial tolerance and our self-image as a people committed to a fair go, some foundations of such wider interaction are sound. But confident Australian engagement with other cultures will be a major challenge and will depend on two pre-conditions.

First, as Australians we will need to have a clear sense of our own identity. A key part of this will inevitably involve reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As Patrick Dodson has reminded us, 'we must look back on the past as a way to the future, not wearing black armbands but neither wearing white blindfolds'. We need to evolve the Australian identity in ways that offer a respected place for all the cultural traditions here, not just the dominant Anglo-Western culture. The evolving Australian culture will necessarily be pluralist, recognising that individuals and groups are interdependent and that conflicts are best managed in an open-minded, constructive way.

Second, we need to understand our geographic neighbours, even where we disagree with their values or practices. In this post-Cold War world, the quest for identity and community is a driving political force, a reaction to the globalisation of capital and communications. Many argue that the most important distinctions among peoples are no longer ideological, political, or economic, but cultural. The danger here is that in the quest for cultural identity, science and reason will be

replaced by unquestioned tradition, religious zealotry or romanticism. Two practical issues stand out here.

Adults as well as children need to become 'Asia literate', to learn about and understand traditions in our own Asia-Pacific region. Progress towards democracy in Indonesia and the likely economic and political influence of China, for example, will make our engagement with those nations a necessity for our own cultural and economic development. The bonds of trade are insufficient. As Alison Broinowski suggests, we may need to distance ourselves from the Western identity that all Asian observers ascribe to us.

Australians need a far better understanding of the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions both within Australia and throughout the world, and how those traditions shape social and political practice and inter-cultural relations. In our own region, apart from Indigenous spirituality and its relationship with land, the strongest and most complex tradition is Islam. Islam is on the rise throughout the world and is likely to prove a major force in the 21st century. Indonesia is the largest Islamic nation in the world and several other South-East Asian nations are Islamic, most notably Malaysia. Research shows that those educated in the Judeo-Christian tradition generally fear Muslims. Moreover, our political system is based on a secular state and our education system generally separates secular and religious knowledge – liberal democratic principles rejected by Islam.

What might all this mean for adult education? All of us will need to play a role in further evolving the Australian cultural identity, becoming more secure in a new sense of Australian-ness. This identity will come through an understanding of our cultural origins, reconciliation with our past, understanding our neighbours and drawing strength from our cultural diversity. We will need communication and inter-cultural skills and moral reasoning to enable us to make judgements about different cultural practices as well as to work in diverse cultural environments at home and abroad.

This is to my mind an urgent challenge for adult education.