

# The Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella

**Dr Ragnar Purje** contends that Indigenous cultural knowledge and power are the real driving force of change, advancement and potential in the classroom and education.

Contributions from **Prof Ken Purnell**

## "I'm using my powerhouse" "I'm a good thinker" "I'm a hard worker"

At a remote Indigenous school, students from prep to the senior primary grades, and even some in the junior high school years ran up to me every day, telling me, with huge smiles on their faces, saying "I'm using my powerhouse", "I'm a good thinker", "I'm a hard worker", "I've got the power!" These declarations even took place in the town itself.

These personal utterances of joyful learning from students arose from the daily use of the Responsibility Theory® (RT) program, a brain-based immersive systematic self-talk sequence learning and self-empowerment neuroeducation program; the purpose of which is, from a brain-based and cultural ownership perspective, to not only transform the lives of students, but to also empower teachers, and to advance self-directed learning engagement.

### This is all about you and your power!

When applying RT from the outset, I told the students: "I'm here to talk to you about your, power! All of this power – which you have, own and control, – is real, it's meaningful, and it can be used right now! This power also brings with it consequences, for which you are responsible. All of this power comes from *your powerhouse*. Your brain and your mind are your powerhouse! And this is power, which you own and control, belongs to you! *You've got the power!*"

From a RT perspective, when the following question is asked of the student in the RT classroom: "Who's responsible for what you think, do, say, choose and learn?" There is only one axiomatic response from the student(s): "I am!". This self-talk realisation brings with it powerful self-talk insights and also a sense of personal and associated cultural ownership.

### The imperative and profound importance of cultural ownership

As I entered a senior primary classroom there were students who looked to be doing as they pleased. The RT philosophy focusses on student self-empowerment and associated behavioural responsibilities and also aims to present a process of non-conflict-based classroom behaviour management.

As I saw what was taking place I elevated my voice called for the students – as a general call, not as a specific demanding

instruction – for the students to stop their 'playing' and associated occasional shouting. From my past experiences, I knew initially I would be ignored. Being ignored – from a cultural perspective – made perfect sense to me and this is related to what is known as emic and etic cultural research.

'Emic' and its counterpoint descriptor 'etic' refer to two different types of research undertaken in the social and behavioural sciences.

Emic research is undertaken from within the culture, the etic researcher is an outsider observer, i.e., the etic researcher stands on the bank of the river observing what is taking place among those in the river and tries to understand the what, how, and why of those in the 'river's behaviour'. The etic observer is not part of the collective in the river. The emic observer is not part of the collective either, but there is an attempt to try to experience the cultural insiders' point of view (by entering the river) of their specific cultural world.

### The importance of cultural relevancy and cultural identity

The classroom disruptive play, with its culturally significant talk, and paying no mind to the teacher; all of this – at the etic and non-culturally aware observational level – may be foreign to cultural 'outsiders'. However, these presenting behaviours by these students was culturally and intrinsically understood to all of the emic 'insiders' of the culture, i.e., all of the students in the classroom.

### The complex Cultural Dreamtime Umbrella

So, there I was in this senior primary classroom, and there was – from an outsider and non-cultural teacher perspective – what could be thought of as 'disorder'. Added to this mix, there were students, who also ignored the teacher, who were sitting quietly on the floor, in their cultural circle of conversation, all of whom were happily engaged in their talk or particular action of choice, which was very much sharing in nature.

These students, in their cultural circle of conversation, were talking quietly with to each other, and, at the same time, playing with and sharing, at this particular time, their Lego blocks and other toys. Two different types of behaviours by the same group, all taking place – and totally understood – under the same and all-important *Cultural Dreamtime Umbrella*.



### A deep and highly sophisticated complex internal cultural understanding

Functioning within this social environment there was, in terms of the presenting behaviours (by all of the students – from the rowdy to the quiet ones), a deep and highly sophisticated complex internal cultural understanding (in relation to what was taking place by these students); which was clearly culturally known

and deeply understood by all of the student in the classroom; otherwise these behaviours would not have been taking place.

The question that must then be immediately asked of course is: How does one stop this (from an outsider's perspective of) 'non-compliant' behaviour, which, however is clearly intrinsically and culturally profoundly understood by all of the students in the classroom?

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### Responsibility theory

Culture and intrinsic motivation are linked. From an intrinsic motivation perspective Responsibility Theory® points out – irrespective of culture or social environment – every person is responsible for and has power over what they think, do, say, choose and learn.

Viktor Frankl writing in his book: *Man's search for meaning*, who lived under impossible circumstances, offered the following powerful considerations:

- When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.
- Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
- Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.



#### Intrinsic control and ownership

It is a person's attitude and their intrinsic motivation which has the most influence over what the individual will think, do, say, choose, and learn. By examining and reporting on student behaviour and student attitudes in relation to their learning outcomes, unless a student was personally motivated to behave and learn, there really was very little anyone else could do except support, encourage and offer advice; ultimately (the alpha and omega) of behaviour is that inevitably, the student is the one who is responsible for their thoughts, behaviour and learning.

What happens when standard outsider pedagogical classroom behaviour strategies, plus the, 'usually associated' warnings, with its 'standard' classroom behaviour consequences are all ignored by students?

#### Intrinsic motivation and culture are linked

To me the answer was clear and obvious. Culture and intrinsic motivation were the answer; that is because culture and intrinsic motivation are inextricably linked.

From an intrinsic motivation perspective RT points out – irrespective of culture or social environment – every person is responsible for and has power over what they think, do, say, choose and learn. This power exists in the brain/mind – what I refer to as the powerhouse, of the self.

#### Learnings are continually being added to culture and learnings are also being lost

Learnings are continually being added to the culture, through the actions of the individuals in the culture. Associated with this, previous learnings, if not passed on, can also be lost. However even with this social and cultural (ebb and flow – add and loss) of information that is taking place within the cultural collective. This internally understood social fluidity is what leads to deep and specific intrinsically unseen (but deeply understood) social knowledge and understandings, which is only intrinsically recognised by each person within each cultural collective itself.

The question that I believe needed to be asked was: What was it that had to happen for Indigenous students to engage in mainstream academic school-based scholarship pursuits? There was and really is only one answer; internal cultural ownership of change. The research in cognitive and associated social behaviour informs that change can – and will only actually and au-

thentically take place – when the spark for change is ignited by the thinking and the action from within the culture itself.

#### Ignition

Ignition is all about self-motivation, drive and commitment on the part of the individual. It is not the responsibility of the cultural outsider to try to light the fire of change potential. The only thing a teacher, adviser, mentor, a coach, parent, school or government administrator can do is offer, support, advice or information. If an individual, or a collective who is listening to this information decides to follow this advice, it is because the individual and/or the collective, has decided that the information presented adds and brings cultural value to the individual, the collective and culture in question.

If this information (presented by a cultural outsider) has meaning to the culture, it is then, and only then, that this spark of insight (of the self, by the self, for the self) will ignite and start the fire of cultural change and possibilities. This process links in with the concept of self-system and self-motivation. The self-system is all about self-motivation. Change can and will only take place when the individual makes the choice to change, and then, coupled with this self-directing motivation, decides that they will engage with the information that has been presented. This outcome indicates that culture, the self-system, self-directed thinking and self-motivation are all linked. Change will only take place if the individuals in the culture want to change; and the change, whatever it may be, needs to be intrinsically and extrinsically valued by the collective in question. Cultural change is about cultural ownership.

#### Culturally based direct intervention

So, there I was in this senior primary classroom, and there was – from an outsider's, observational perspective – 'disruption' in

the classroom. All of the standard mainstream pedagogically based classroom behaviour strategies were not working, and the RT principles and practices were not working, at the level I had previously seen. The reason for this was, as alluded to above, that none of these 'outsider' interventions had any cultural meaning to the students. There was only one universal solution, whatever intervention was to follow had to be culturally based. With that in mind, the Indigenous Behaviour Support Team was contacted by telephone. I informed and described the situation to the Behavioural Support Team member about what was taking place. I was then told the Behaviour Support Team was immediately on its way.

### The Cultural Classroom Leader

With that action now in place I had an epiphany. There was now – for me – no Indigenous Behaviour Management Support, what we had now instead was the *Cultural Classroom Leader*. This for me was a paradigm change. What did this paradigm change – in terms of teaching and classroom behaviour management – actually mean? This meant that the classroom needed to be culturally led and this meant the classroom had to be managed and specifically directed by the Cultural Classroom Leader.

As for me, the teacher, I was not 'the teacher in charge' I now held the position of *Academic Classroom Support Teacher*. This meant the operation of the classroom, in terms of behaviour management was under the leadership, control and direction of the *Cultural Classroom Leader*. My role now, as the Academic Classroom Support Teacher, was to present the academic information. This meant that I would only begin my teaching when the Cultural Classroom Leader, in terms of his/or her cultural knowledge, decided when the students were ready to learn, that the Cultural Classroom Leader would only then (openly and transparently) invite me into the now known *cultural classroom*. This meant that I would only commence teaching when the Cultural Classroom Leader asked me to teach. Associated with this, I would also stop my academic teaching whenever the Cultural Classroom Leader wanted me to stop.

### The Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella

What we now had in place was a culturally based classroom pedagogy, operating under *The Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella*. We now had a cultural emic based classroom 'i.e., a culturally relevant open and transparent 'secret classroom business' schoolroom.

This does not mean there were any hidden or opaque presenting classroom behaviour secrets. Everything that was taking place in the classroom was open and transparent. However (and powerfully), what was taking place within the classroom, in terms of the intrinsic values and cultural mindset of the students and the Cultural Classroom Leader, was that the classroom was now operating under the internal and hidden emic deep social understanding of the Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella; which was under the direct control and all-important ownership of the Cultural Classroom Leader, and in association with the cultural collective of the students.

### Secret classroom business

From a broad-based school and educational perspective, those three words, 'secret classroom business', might, at first reading, be a concern. Obviously and axiomatically there must not be any secrets in any classroom.

Each and every classroom in every school must be accountable, open and transparent. Therefore, *any* Indigenous school (as with *any* mainstream school, in *every* classroom, and *every* lesson), that will be operating under the Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella, will be open, transparent and accountable. However, even for this openness and transparency taking place, what will not be seen, understood or known, by any observing outsider, will be the emic mindset and the cultural mores of the cultural classroom. It is this emic based, and profound internally understood culturally based knowledge is what brings this 'secret classroom business' into existence, and which lives in the mind of the traditional owners of the culture.

However, the 'secret classroom' environment and operating social and geographical real estate, and its observed social behaviours, will not be a secret. This can be expressed as follows: "I can see what you are doing." If the observed behaviour is negative, and/or disruptive, this observed negative behaviour will be addressed by the Classroom Cultural Leader. The same is true if the presenting behaviour is positive and constructive. All behaviours need to be addressed by the Classroom Cultural Leader.

### Cultural change can and will only take place by and through the culture in question

In terms of school and classroom-based learning potential, what we have now is the culture being understood by the culture. The culture is being led by the culture; and whatever changes take place will take place as a result of the cultural owners making these changes. This is power. This is real, meaningful and authentic cognitive and cultural power! This is the internally understood and unseen emic state of where all members of the traditional culture are able to share their cultural thoughts as follow: "I know that you know what we all know."

This however does not change the universal truth of personal responsibility. In terms of presenting behaviours, whatever behaviour is presented, this action remains with and is the responsibility of the individual who is presenting the behaviour in questions. And if, for example, the presenting behaviour arises from and through a cultural perspective, this does not change the value, the impact or the responsibility of the behaviour. A presenting negative behaviour will tend to lead to negative consequences, and a presenting positive behaviour will tend to lead to positive consequences.

In conclusion, when it comes to classroom cultural knowledge, this cultural classroom knowledge is intrinsically known and understood by the Cultural Classroom Leader, and it is also intrinsically known by the students of the culture, and the entire culture itself, where the school is located, all of which are now operating under the Cultural Classroom Dreamtime Umbrella.