How do you do
Our Business?

Jody Saxton is a Deaf Aboriginal woman who has over 20 years experience in working in the area of training, awareness, access, advocacy, and the impact of disabilities on Aboriginal communities. This article is written with much cultural respect and without any malice towards parties who provide or access services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities.

What do participants want and need?

Many in Aboriginal communities wish to continue and learn new things but are coming up short on how to do this in a way that benefits them and gives them the independence they seek. They are unaware of support that is available, how it can be accessed, what is needed for them to achieve enrolment, participation and success. Aboriginal people with a disability wish to be supported in a culturally appropriate way. This often requires flexibility to meet their learning and cultural support needs. It can mean that they need to be given more time to complete work due to cultural interruptions that sometimes occur.

Whilst many Aboriginal people with a disability are articulate and able to ask for supports, many are frustrated that they are either sent to mainstream only or Indigenous only options. Little thought is given to culturally appropriate placements and this makes many Aboriginal participants pull out of a place in a course or employment opportunity. Often the participant is classified as either disabled or Aboriginal, but rarely both. This means that both cultural needs and support needs are overlooked. If Aboriginal participants with a disability are to achieve their ‘deadliest’ potential it is essential that both cultural and support requirements are part of their learning or employment programs.
It is clear that many services are not aware of ‘how to do our business’. This article is not to give specific methods or theories, it’s to give an overview of how to start developing relationships, protocols and practices that reflect the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. It serves as a reminder that the community has an unmet need that has to be addressed if we are to support and maintain employment, education and training opportunities for Aboriginal people with a disability.

It is a good idea before someone begins to develop support advice that they look at what is available at local, state and national levels for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. These services may be connected with state bodies responding to rights and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. Agencies that might be approached include local Aboriginal and Torres Strait co-operatives, health services, disability support services and advocacy councils. These services may be able to provide appropriate advice and training in the development of culturally appropriate programs and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. Always remember though, that the participant’s own voice is the one that has to be heard.

**Raising awareness amongst service staff** in regards to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities is always a good place to start. The benefit is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities will have staff and services that are better able to develop culturally appropriate training and support.

**To develop culturally appropriate support services**, support organisations must listen, relate, respect, and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. They need to ensure that everyone’s voice is to be heard, that everyone’s rights should be addressed and everyone’s abilities are recognised and utilised for the benefit of being active members of our society.

**Successful examples of education institutions working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability.**

**Dave**

**Dave is an Aboriginal person who is deaf** and also has a physical disability. He completed his Certificate III in Arts Administration. During his time at TAFE, Dave found it difficult to keep up with the work. Dave is a guy who finds it shameful to ask for help.

Having a yarn with Dave I was able to identify that:

1. Dave wasn’t aware of Student Services Officers;
2. Dave didn’t know who to ask for help. He felt very embarrassed about not being able to ask for help;
3. Dave’s teacher wasn’t Aboriginal and he feared racist feedback from his teacher;
4. Dave didn’t know he could use the Aboriginal Liaison Officer to help with communication between him and his teachers;
5. Dave wasn’t sure what a Tutor, support worker, note-taker did?; and
6. Dave couldn’t access classes where there were steps (no lift).

**Solutions:**
The following people were all involved in assisting, or could be assisting, Dave:

1. Class teachers;
2. Student Service Manager;
3. Disability Liaison Officer (DLO);
4. Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO);
5. Dave’s advocate; and
6. Dave.

A meeting was organised to discuss concerns over the cultural barriers for Deaf, Aboriginal people with disabilities and accessing education.

Together we yawned with Dave about his options for support. It was agreed:

7. he can have a support person to take notes in class for him;
8. a tutor to help him understand his assignments;
9. that his access to class can be arranged – that he has time to navigate the stairs or that classes be moved to ground level whenever possible;
10. that student service counsellors be available, if or when, Dave needed to express any concerns about how he is going;
11. meeting with ALO or DLO about class material or changes to timetable; and
12. Dave to yarn with appropriate people such as advocates if he is being unfairly treated at TAFE.

**Outcomes:**

1. Dave attended classes with a clear outline in his diary of assignments, timetable, workers, meeting (chats with ALO, DLO) so he knows he has support and fits in such meetings to address any concerns;
2. ALO working with DLO for other Aboriginal students with disabilities to ensure supports are provided;
3. DLO working with teachers on campuses to ensure that all students are aware of their rights to access such supports;
4. Teachers developing and monitoring work and developing plans to ensure accessible assignments in easy-to-read format for students when requested;
5. Student Service Officers – attending appropriate cultural awareness training to work better with Aboriginal people with disabilities; and
6. TAFE Disability Action Plan upgraded to take in Cultural Awareness Training on working with students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Sophie

Sophie attends secondary college in a rural community in Victoria. Sophie has Downs Syndrome. She started her VCAL (Victorian Certificate Applied Learning) in Hospitality. Sophie attends school three days a week and TAFE one day a week. Sophie is the only child in her family and she is aged 18 years.

Through having a yarn with Sophie and her support people a number of barriers were identified. These included:

1. Transport between the school and TAFE;
2. Provision of support worker (Sophie was told she would have the worker from the school go with her);
3. Older students asking her to buy alcohol (she’s the eldest in the group);
4. Sophie’s absenteeism due to cultural events and sorry business;
5. Sophie’s ability to complete set tasks;
6. Sophie’s awareness of safety in the kitchen (her mobility and dexterity in working with knives etc.; and
7. Sophie’s ability to complete practical classes such as front of house and waitressing.

Solutions:

1. Engaged Sophie with ALO and DLO at TAFE and school to organise support staff, tutor, and counselling at both sites;
2. Spoke to Sophie’s carer regarding safe plan of consumption of alcohol and substances (via counselling support);
3. Worked with school to ensure that transport between TAFE and school was provided (taxi system under student with disability funds and Sophie’s entitlements as a dual student) or other local means or agreements between school and TAFE (Sophie may not have been told or remembered such a service exists);
4. Work with classmates on disability awareness;
5. Work with Sophie and class on Responsible Serving of Alcohol (part of course but re-fresher when necessary);
6. Support worker to help Sophie understand and demonstrate safe practice in Hospitality industry (role play, articles);
7. Sophie to be supported by class teacher to engage with others to show leadership in completing tasks when trained;
8. Awareness provided to support team about cultural issues such as ‘sorry business’; and
9. Feedback from Sophie on what is working and not working for her.

Outcomes:
1. School implemented program for VCAL to be more accessible for students with disabilities;
2. Aboriginal school officers now engage families for input of such appropriate programs;
3. Work done by DLO, ALO and industry leader to ensure best outcomes for learning for Aboriginal students with disabilities;
4. Sophie working at local take away with support worker for first three months, routine established and Sophie working independently for last 4 weeks; and
5. School recognising VCAL teacher for being able to engage industry to take on students with disabilities in many other sectors, not just hospitality.

The cases of Dave and Sophie are classic examples of being Aboriginal and also having a disability. To ensure their success in their chosen area of training, it was important that both these issues be addressed. Using the Aboriginal Liaison Officer and Disability Liaison Officer and having them work together with other identified support people such as VCAL teachers ensured all areas of need were addressed. Both Aboriginal issues and disability issues were addressed through skilled case management and collaboration involving disability and cultural supports.

If you would like more information you can email Jody on:
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Alternatively you can contact your NDCO for assistance in identifying appropriate supports for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people with a disability.

While all effort has been made to ensure information within is accurate, no responsibility is taken for any inaccuracies. This document has not been authored by DEEWR and DEEWR accepts no responsibility for inaccuracies that may arise. This document should be used for information and reference only. If in doubt always seek expert advice. December 2010.