

6. Exploring possibilities: Teaching and learning at Tranby

This chapter is about how the teachers Kevin brought into Tranby tried to experiment further with teaching and learning. The contributors include: Terry Widders, Chris Milne, Isabel Flick, Karen Flick and myself, Heather Goodall, as interviewer.

Terry Widders is an Indigenous researcher and teacher from Armidale on the northern tablelands of New South Wales. After he had finished his Honours degree in Linguistics at Macquarie University in 1980, he and his wife Margaret had gone to Japan where Terry was studying Japanese language so he could learn more about the history and politics of the Ainu and other indigenous minorities elsewhere in China and east Asia. In this interview, Terry talked with me, Heather Goodall, because I had taught with him in the Tertiary Preparation Course Terry had managed at Tranby in the early years of the 1980s.

Terry: It begins with a letter that I received when I was in Japan from Brian Doolan in 1981. So I was in Hokkaido, in Sapporo the main city: 'Heard you were around and you'd finished your initial studies... Would you be interested in calling in to see us here at Tranby when you get back?' So... I did. And another reason was I had to get some work! Never forget the work!

Brian's letter said Tranby had changed since Alf had died and so on, and they were working on a new kind of model. I didn't know at that stage what it was but...

So early '82, I went around and they were talking about a system of TAFE¹-type contracts for positions and the idea was to develop something 'core' at Tranby. They still had the old business studies unit if I remember correctly, that had been a long running thing from the co-operative days. And then there was talk about becoming an educational *institution*. But then how you *could* be, that was what the conversation was all about. I think I lobbed in there with a number of other people, like Chris Milne, and perhaps Dave Morrissey ... he was perhaps later but it was about how to develop a kind of presence in, for example, Parks and Wildlife, as you'd say today, developing an Indigenous perspective in the curriculum...

But at the beginning it was much more focused then on the people who were going to be taking these courses. My working ideas or assumptions were firstly a sort of cultural capital idea, where rather than have a program of development

1 Technical and Further Education.

for a category of people, bright or otherwise, the idea was instead that people are already bright in themselves, it's a question of cultivating individuals, in their own pathways. The other assumption was that that this could have a community base of sorts, so it was related to a community idea outside of Tranby as well as Tranby itself becoming a kind of re-created community education centre. What that could be was still to be worked out. It wasn't going to be a hub of a co-operative type of structure as such, but the principles were still continuing, hence the Business Studies course...

So, there we were, and then a couple of things happened, just off the cuff as it were. One little wet day, not too far into '82, we got this call from some head teacher at East Sydney Tech, who said 'There's an Aboriginal class who are doing a tertiary preparatory certificate'... but it wasn't very clear over the phone ... 'some of them have left, they're in a classroom of their own, the course is probably not going to continue, would you come over to talk to them?' I thought 'Come over and talk to *who*? About what?!

So I went over. It was really wet! And it was really archetypal, gloomy institutional architecture ... and there in the smallest room right down at the very back of this miserable, damp institution... there they were, all sitting around like little wet fowls! ... And there was about seven of them and that was the point, that the number was too small for the course to continue. But it was in the context of, well, seven of whom! They could have joined another class! I thought isn't there another class running? But they said no, this is a class for Aboriginal people! And I thought, 'What an institution!' But anyway, Robert Smith, from Western Australia, was the kind of spokesperson. And he explained that, in effect, they'd been abandoned! And the head teacher was dealing with it in an administrative way, by saying, 'Well, we just don't have the numbers to continue, and we *aren't* going to continue! And so would Tranby do something with them!'

So, 'Well', we thought, 'what *can* you do with seven bedraggled little numbers eh?' And they probably looked at us and thought, 'Well, who are *these* people!'

Anyway, it was pretty much on the spot that we said, 'Well why don't you come back to Tranby with us and we'll have a course there?' And so we did! It was a bit like little henny penny the red hen!

So we said 'Well if they're here, we'll need to have a tertiary prep course!' There'd been some talk about it, but it wasn't really being planned yet. But this sort of personified it! They walked in the front door! And said 'We're it!'

So that did then crystallise the idea. Then the talk was about *how* it was going to happen, not *was* it going to happen. And on the spot, I think I became the head

teacher of the Tertiary Preparation Course! Not that I knew how to be a head teacher of anything! I was still practicing sounds in Japanese at that time, and wondering who the Ainu were!

So then we put up a proposal on the basis that it was already there happening, we've got a core group, and so we said, 'We want to run a tertiary preparation course here, and look who we've got to do it!' And the other thing was to recruit others to build up the numbers. So apart from being the head teacher and all that, in practical terms, we just got so many hours paid by TAFE. Then after that I remember walking around in a 5 km radius of Tranby, especially into the Redfern and South Sydney area and knocking on doors. Or we were talking to people in the Business Studies course and saying 'You wouldn't happen to have a sister or a cousin who was interested in this would you?' There were a number of other young women, mainly young women, who had been somewhere about in the TAFE system, just nibbling on the edges of a potential, tertiary type course. There were three or four like that, one who wanted to become a nurse.

Of the original seven, I think about four eventually stayed, and this other six or seven or so came on board. It was '83 when it eventually kicked off! I think we started somewhat informally in '82, got them registered as being part of a course. But I think we started off with the TAFE year in the beginning of '83...

Only in retrospect did I see how it was *running*. We were more interested in what it could become. There were two things we needed to think about. One was the educational framework thing; and that had settled into place. This was a legitimate framework, we could do it. We had a class. That was one thing. So that was part of the becoming process, that's the pathway it took...

But the other thing was that it was all very cash poor. It was the casualised labour problem. You could only be paid for so many hours: of course there was so much work there you could stay 24 hours if you liked! But you could still only be paid for so many hours, ten hours, 15 hours or however many it was from TAFE. And that wasn't enough to live on! At least for me, I was freshly back and we had to find a place to live and pay rent and Margaret had come back to finish her last year at University. So it was a balance between the practical, and what you needed to do that, and how far we could push the opportunity of setting up something like what was then called the 'TEPC', the Tertiary Education Preparatory Course. So that – for me at least – was the balance between those two things.

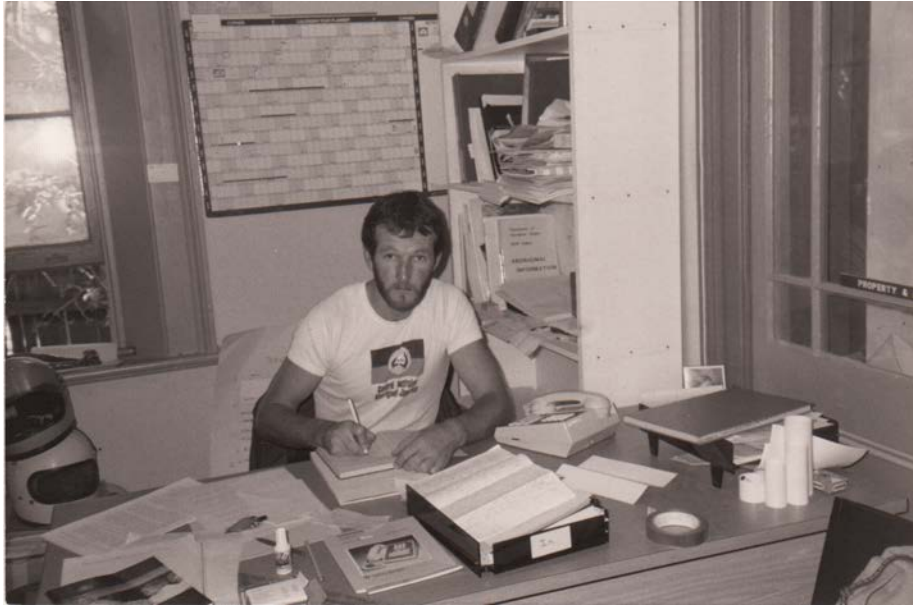


Figure 6.1: Brian at his desk in the ‘back office’ – the tiny room which became the teaching preparation space sometimes for six or seven people at a time – and, when Lyn Riley Mundine was there – the occasional baby!

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

And I think then it was also up to Kevin and Brian, doing the *talk* with TAFE people, and union people, to gather the broader support for it. There was Tim Hornibrook, from the NSW education department, who talked more about people and possibilities than about programs, whereas others talked more about programs and dollars... although they might also have talked about possibilities! So what we were talking about with TAFE was what it connected with, the bigger planning and bigger structural possibilities. Because if we were going to *become* something, we need to become something on a firmer basis, not just TAFE hours. We needed three year funding, we needed to get hooked up with the department. So that was more the preoccupation of Kevin and Brian at that time I think.

Another arm was the possibility that Dave Morrissey and Chris Milne were raising, they were talking about Black Books becoming not just a business, but a repository, not only of people and their life experiences, but as that was *written*, as that was a focus of Indigenous literature and other kinds of literature. Kathy Campbell was already there and had a community development role. She was a bouncy type of person and it was her bounce and ideas that, along with Kevin and Brian, that shaped these meta-programs.

So we had this sort of committee, people like Kevin, Brian and Kathy, they could make the *talk* of possibilities, and then there was this next layer of people, like Chris and you and me and Dave and others, who sort of scrambled into the rabbit warren almost, figuratively of course, because we were trying to find pathways of specificity. And so these specificities then began to take shape, like the Black Books thing and the TEPC thing. And then these others kept talking, Kevin and Kathy and others, they kept talking and they were asking: 'How do we give this thing a shape in the community as well?' So this was really getting started in '83, in a process of 'becoming' as much as being clearly formed.

But the other thing just for me was having enough money to live on. Just by chance this was the first year that that Aboriginal History course started at Macquarie, with Eric Wilmot and Michael Williams. Unfortunately Eric went to the Institute for Aboriginal Studies! I rang Michael up to wish him well, this was in February... And he asked me if I wanted a job as a casual tutor! Well, I did take it on, it gave me a bit more of an economic base. And what made it useful at least in my head was that I could see that here was the University base and over here was the Tranby/TEPC base. It allowed me to work on what possible ways you could see someone going from here to there, if they wanted to.

But that was just one pathway. There were other bridges to develop, to community organisations as they were becoming, there were public service positions people might have wanted to go into, it related to what they wanted, like that young woman who said: 'I want to become a nurse.' So then what we tried to do was to link her up specifically with people in nursing faculties and shape the course to fit what she would need. So it was individually tailored...

We were trying to create the TEPC structure that would give the students themselves the capacity and the information to go where they wanted to go. That's what we thought was the thing that was most important for that type of a course, rather than you finish a course first and then try to fill out forms about what you might want to do. What we were trying to do was very much the cultivation of individuals, so it was very intensive. It might have missed the mark many times but there were good intentions and plenty of energy!

Looking from the community

Isabel Flick was a key activist in north-west NSW, living in Collarenebri but travelling widely and well known as an advocate for better educational opportunities as well as land rights. She knew many of Tranby's country students because she had seen them in their community and family settings, and she knew the way that rural schools had undermined their confidence and

failed them in any real education. As she watched those same students at Tranby, like Brendan and Jacqui, she saw the gains they made in practical knowledge and in confidence. She talked with Kevin about her impressions.



Figure 6.2: Isabel Flick sitting with a group of Tranby students – playing cards was a great way to break the ice.

Courtesy Chris Milne.

Isabel: I was surprised with Brendan last night at the Tranby Graduation: he got up and spoke ... he was very nervous but he did the job really well. And I thought, for people like him and Jacqui, you know, that's what Tranby is all about, eh? It's given them a life, and it's given them education. And the self confidence.

Kevin: That young Cheryl too, she spoke like a professional last night. When she first started Tranby, she couldn't even look at you. She was that shy. I congratulated her and she said: 'I was really nervous!' But like I told her, I couldn't tell that at the time! It was excellent.

Isabel: That's where it gives us satisfaction, you know, to think that that's really happened. And we've watched Jacqui grow there. Its been one of the best things she ever did. Then that time when young Tommy got kicked out, you'd think it was the end of the world for him. He thought I was going to really back him up. But I said, 'Oh well, you couldn't have been doing the right thing'. And he started giving me a story. And then his sister came in and she told him off. And

she said, 'Well, you weren't doing the right thing. You just go away and get your act together'. And he did too. And when he came back he really put his head down.

Kevin: Yeah, see they're not barred for life when they're told, 'Go and get your act together!' He mucked around for a whole year.

Isabel: Yes. He was so cocksure sure of himself wasn't he? But then he was right after that eh?

Now, the way those classes worked were of so much benefit too. Tranby had community people like me in there talking to the students. When they dealt with the Deaths in Custody reports I was able to tell them how that came about. About how Tranby College was the place that we had the first meeting to say, 'Can we get a Royal Commission into Deaths In Custody?' And they didn't even know that.

And it wasn't just students at Tranby either. The nicest experience that I've had in my time was this little Koorie girl at the St Scholastics Catholic school up the road. She hung around Tranby until she saw me and then she said, 'Oh, Auntie I just wondered if you'd come down there and help me. I'm doing this reconciliation thing, and I can't seem to get a lot of support. I know Aden Ridgeway's coming and Linda Burney but I'd like to get some Elders to come. And I thought I'd ask you'.

So I ended up doing that. I thought 'Oh, I hate this because I'm here, for the first time. I'm going to a Catholic school, and getting involved with Catholics'. But it turned out to be a really nice day. When I told them about how I learnt what a clothes-horse was, when I was apprenticed out and I thought it was a real horse, these kids in the classroom just busted themselves laughing! And then when I was telling them how my Mum's family was all sent away and a lot of the things that happened to us in between that, and they were saying, 'We don't understand'. One little girl said, 'Why did they go to a reserve? Where's a reserve? Where do you see a reserve?'

When then that young Koorie girl comes back to me after, and said, 'Well Aunt, you know what happened? The other Koorie kids don't talk to me now. Because they don't believe in reconciliation'. And I said: 'Oh, that's fine, you're starting to work in black politics now. You're going to be a stronger gin than me when you're finished, because now what have you got to say when people tell you, they don't believe in reconciliation? You can say, 'Oh well, lots of people don't. Some people do. But I've got my own opinion'. I said, 'You go on from there. I think you'll be a really good little ambassador for black people'.



Figure 6.3: Isabel and her sister, Rose Fernando, with their niece, Jacqui Mason when she graduated from her Tranby course.

Courtesy Chris Milne.

She said, 'Oh, I will say that too. I'm going over to New Zealand for this youth conference soon. And I said, 'Well, there you go. You're right into it, and you're 15'. She told me, 'I wouldn't be like you. I don't think I'll ever be like you'. I said, 'You're going to be better because you're going to have a good education, if you decide you're going to have a good education. You might decide you're going to get drunk and have babies and all that'. 'Oh, no', she said. 'No.'

And I said, 'Well, that's the decision you've got to make, only you can do that. If you need help or you want to talk to someone, there'll be someone here at Tranby to help you'. 'Really?' she said. So she got that support straight away. And that's why I think that was the most wonderful experience that I've had. Here's a young kid coming to me at Tranby and saying: 'How do I handle it?' And when she left she was really saying, 'Oh Auntie, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that'. She said, 'I really feel better now. Thank you Auntie, I really feel better'.

Linking to the community

The teaching staff were also very conscious of trying to shape the course structures so as to take advantage of the community connections that Tranby offered as well as to make learning support available to community people who came to Tranby for political and social reasons. Here Terry Widders talked about how he saw the emerging college-based programs relating to the early idea of education *in* the community.

Terry: Well, Kathy Campbell as a community development person was there talking about community education in this meta way. And then we had all these people coming through Tranby all the time, people from Joe McGinness and Terry O'Shane from North Queensland to the north-west NSW mob, either just stopping over or dropping in on their way to a meeting. So there was still a fairly regular stream of people and so it was very much a lived expression: people would come and talk there, offload their agenda and talk about whatever they were on about, or what they were doing, like Joe in the north ... So that whole 'ambience', if you like, of educational courses was still there, but we were asking, 'Where do you find a specific kind of a context for doing that?' and of course it had to be balanced with the economic practicalities, 'What wherewithal did you have to do what you were thinking about doing?'



Figure 6.4: Cookie with Tranby students, 1985.

Courtesy Chris Milne.

So it was a wider idea than the old co-operative idea, where you set up a co-operative here and work out from that, build a bakery or whatever. This broader idea involved asking, 'What would be the kind of framework?' Would it be land rights in NSW? Or self-determination or autonomy at a local level? But you needed people to do that as well. 'So how do you actually *do* this?' This was my recollection of it anyway...

So if you've got TEPC and Business Studies... what else could you do to cultivate individuals who were already doing that work in the community? Like Karen Flick? At Tranby, you'd see people like Karen at that time who were not just standing still, they were actually already going, trying to gee up a whole region... like the whole of the north-west at the time... So there was another version of the little wet fowls if you like – another version of the people who wanted to do something and were looking for pathways.

For these people out in the community, how do you support them? To be in accord with that broader, community dynamic? And what's the structure you might set up? Do you set up a central community committee?

Well in a way, it was already there, just through the way Cookie and others *knew* people, whether it was the South Coast, the north-west, or across the whole

country. But at the same time, I think it was always also a question of: 'Well, it's a great idea, and you might put them up at a base here, but what's going to pay the wages for the next month, and the month after that? What's going to pay for the renovations that the place needed just to keep going?' So those things were running at the same time too. It was a matter of setting up a base, financially as well as with practical programs.

And the thing I remember coming up in a practical kind of way was the women's group called NOW in western Sydney, with Robyn Williams. That developed through 1984, it was a lot about reflections on life experience for many of the people in it, so it was a pretty open weave set of possibilities.

And certainly things at Tranby were becoming a bit shaped up because of the structure out of which it came, like TAFE and its courses and accreditation and that sort of thing. But woven through that were all these other individuals, like Karen Flick and Joe McGinness and the other visitors. So the question for us all was, 'How do you get a grip on that in other ways than have a cup of tea and a talk?' Because the parts of that new structure at Tranby, the administration, Black Books, classes, getting funding... was all taking up a fair bit of time of the relatively limited numbers of people who were there. Well, I thought that one way to engage with all the people around like Karen and Joe was really just to *offer*: just offer support and let them decide what they needed or wanted...

Tranby and young people from the bush

Karen Flick was one of the young people living in the bush who came into contact with Kevin Cook and Tranby through her family taking part in the country meetings in which Kevin and Tranby were involved. Her practical education and opportunity to take part in politics was through Cookie and Tranby. In this section, Karen is talking with Kevin about her experience of Tranby and its backing of her work and learning.

Karen: I think the first things that I remember to do with Tranby and with you Cookie was I always heard your name around the house up in Wee Waa. Kevin Cook this, yeah, and Kevin Cook that! And if you want to get anything done well all we got to do is ring up Kevin Cook. And as a kid, I never knew who this Kevin Cook was you know!

So as I'm growing up, I started to go to all the meetings with Mum and Dad and Auntie Iz and all that mob, and that's when I got to meet you. We were setting up the first state land council, before the Act, it was the organising, campaigning body. Those were meetings where you'd go to just sit down and have a yarn with people and get strength from each other. We'd be talking about the issues and

working out where we wanted to go with it, to come up with a bit of a strategy about stuff. Those were bush meetings or, you know meetings at somebody's house or, or whatever and a couple of the ones that I remember were the regular ones at Dubbo out at the farm. But also the ones down at Menindee on the mission there and, people would just come from all over the place, and, and also when we first set up the North Western Regional Land Council at Angledool.

Cookie was a key player for us in terms of finding the dollars to allow people to meet and sit down and yarn. But it wasn't just the dollar side of it, it was also, for me anyway, to provide a bit of solidarity and a strategic approach so that we who are out there in the bush knew that we had some other contacts and that there was support elsewhere. So for us, for me anyway, Cookie was somebody who was able to bring a lot of different people together, and, you know facilitate those meetings and allow that discussion to happen.

So through Cookie and Tranby, we'd be connecting up with people like Jacko Campbell and Nan Campbell and that mob from the South Coast, so it wasn't very many people but it was a good solid group of hard core people who would get up and have a go. And these are also the people I think who also did things in their own communities. You know who challenged all the time and never gave up. It was also about sitting down with your family, so you'd have kids there running around, or you'd have old people, or you'd have a game of cards, and everybody would just be there sitting around. So you'd have all these political discussions and meetings but it was in the right kind of atmosphere and I think that's what worked a lot.

I remember at one of the Dubbo meetings and Cookie approached me about going to the Kimberleys for some Federation of Land Council meeting, and I think I just said yes. I mean I didn't even know where I was going or what the hell I was going to do there, and...

Kevin: I had a pretty good approach, I just said 'You're going to the Kimberleys...'!

Karen: I said 'yes' because it showed me that somebody else had some faith in me and trusted me to do that and so I felt pretty proud about it.

I remember when I went up to the Kimberleys, I like it so much because of two things. One was catching that red eye flight from Sydney to Perth. You stopped at all those places along the way in the middle of the night. Then, flying into Kununurra you see those huge rocks, and I was seeing the country for the first time from up here. It looked just like I could see the spirit in the land, you know you could see those giant sleeping lizards or you could see something had happened there. That for me really connected with country. It was like all those discussions that we'd been having in those bush meetings, about how connecting with country was so important.

But the other thing about going to the Kimberleys was that I was welcomed there and I was welcomed through Cookie's name. So then we got off up there and there was this other old fella from Cairns, he's come across from the North Queensland Land Council. And he was talking about Kevin Cook this and Kevin Cook that as well, so it was obvious the name was around the place. And then I met Johnny Watson for the first time and, Jimmy Bindary at Kununurra and that was just absolutely amazing.

The meeting was in language most of the time, it wasn't a big meeting but there were big issues going on, it was after Noonkanbah and it was around the same time as the Argyle Diamond Mine fight, so people were really concerned about those particular issues and how the company was treating them. So the Federation of Land Councils played a fairly big role in that. And Cookie's association with that travelled all across the country. I actually talked to Johnny Watson about this, many years after when I actually went up there to work. When I first met him that time, he'd sleep right there and I'd be over here and he was sort of looking out for me and making sure that I was okay. When I talked to him years later he said, 'I looked after you because of Cookie', because he knew Cookie and he respected him and he knew that there was this thing called the Federation of Land Councils was a pretty solid organisation.

Those of us who were teachers at Tranby were often, like myself, Heather Goodall, university graduates with a strong interest in Aboriginal politics – but not a lot of teaching experience or even qualifications. Kevin had invited us to come on board because he liked our enthusiasm and our politics – but he wanted to reshape the learning at Tranby too. Apart from Brian, most of us had not thought about how to pass on the knowledge we had gained over the years at schools and universities, much less about how we could learn from students. And the Tranby students, as Karen and Isabel have explained, had a wealth of life experiences between them all. So we needed to learn from each other – but when we started at Tranby, we did not have many ideas of how to make that happen.

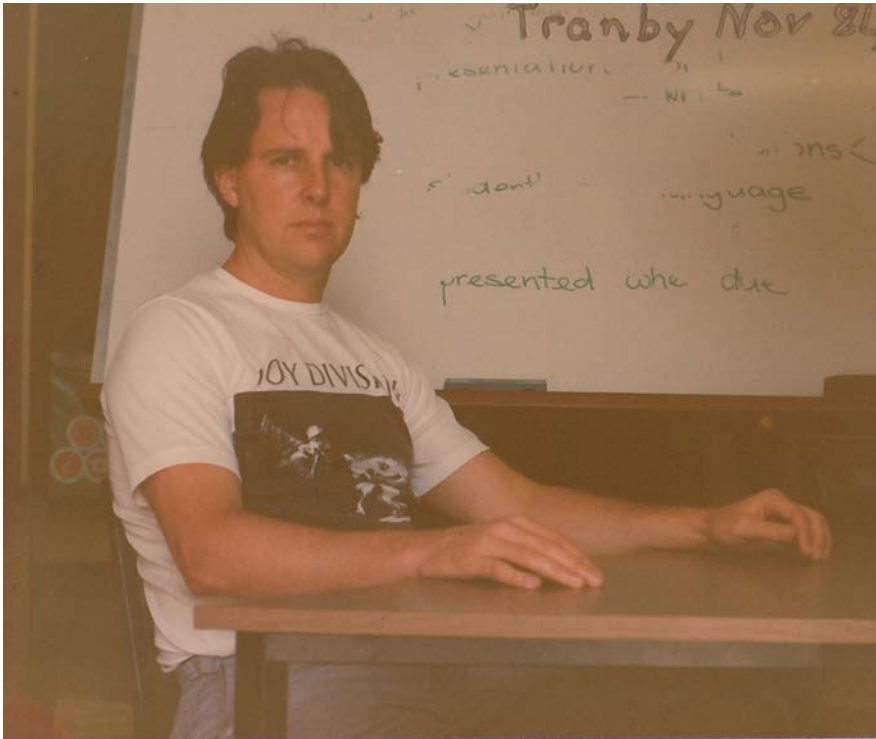


Figure 6.5: Chris Milne in 1984, while he was teaching at Tranby.

Courtesy Chris Milne.

Chris Milne came to Tranby soon after Brian and Terry started. Chris had a degree in economics and was working on a NSW government research project with Lyall Munro jnr in Redfern, about identifying Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Brian brought some students to talk to Chris about the project and then, seeing an opportunity to fill a real gap in Tranby's teaching capacity, Brian asked Chris if he would come to Tranby to do some teaching in statistics.

This worked well with Kevin's goal to make sure the College could teach both the politics of economy but also the basic numeracy needed to run a co-operative or a community business. So before long, Chris was given the role of organising Business Studies and maths, numeracy and economics across all the programs, and later the first computing courses. And then it wasn't long again before Chris was involved in excursions and the wider activities of students.

Like Brian and Kevin, Chris found the College had created a welcoming space for its students. He remembered that a number of young gay Aboriginal students came to Sydney and felt accepted at Tranby, whereas they had been uncomfortable in their home communities, which highlights one of the

contradictions of the times. But Tranby was not without its own tensions. One of the issues which demanded attention from everyone was gender. Kevin's experience in the Builders Labourers' Federation had already showed him the strengths of women's presence in a union, and in education, women were more highly visible than in other industries. But at Tranby initially, as Chris pointed out, there was a largely male leadership until Helen Boyle became Director of Studies, in the mid 1980s, after Brian Doolan had left to take up work in Central Australia. Helen's role was not an easy one for many of the men in the organisation: Chris saw it as one of the costs of change for many of them, both personally and politically. But the examples of Isabel and other strong women involved in Tranby were crucial in establishing it as an environment where women's voices could be heard. The effectiveness of that voice is clear in the next chapter in which Karen Flick talks with Kevin about the campaign to end black deaths in custody. Karen, herself from NSW, Rose Stack the Tranby librarian and Helen Boyle, the Director of Studies, both from Western Australia, and Rose Wanganeen, a Tranby teacher from South Australia, all took extensive roles, with Isabel herself, in shaping that campaign tirelessly.

While these currents were all important parts of the way Tranby offered new learning experiences for both students and staff, we all felt the need to think about our 'teaching' – and how we were not confident that we were much good at it. The importance of the link between communities and the College, and the role of political activism in college teaching, were fundamental to the way things changed, but as well, we as teachers had to change too.

Chris remembers that many of us – who had degrees but no teaching qualifications – relied on our own classroom experiences, however unhappy they might have been. I was certainly one who did that at Tranby in 1983. I can remember that, the more worried I became that I wasn't teaching well in my first few months of teaching Tertiary Prep history, the more I fell back on the most authoritarian of my school memories – asking students to rote learn dates or 'causes and effects'. Brian Doolan realised that we all needed to get some training, and he enrolled the lot of us in a TAFE Graduate Diploma in Adult Community Education, starting in August 1983. We discovered the working class traditions of English trade union education, but which had been reshaped in the light of community education movements in Latin America and Africa in the 1960s. So we were pushed over the edge – pretty eagerly – into experiments in 'participant-directed learning'. We were suddenly able to restructure the Tranby programs so they reflected students' interests and took off from students' knowledge. For staff like me, and for some students, this was a breathtaking relief! But for other students, it was a frustrating time when there seemed to be no scaffolding and no direction to the learning we were offering. As Chris too remembers, for many of the Tranby

students their expectation was that to be credible, Tranby should be like school. They wanted to be catching up on what they had missed at school, not being forced to leap off into a new direction.

In time, things settled down a bit – the feedback from students and the recognition that each student had their own learning style all helped to make teachers more receptive to really learning from students. There is a whole other book here to be explored... with more student voices! But that will have to wait till later.