

HAVE YOUR MANNERS

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Reference:

Harris, S. 1987, "Have your Manners" in Ruth Lipscombe (ed.)
Living and Learning in an Aboriginal Community,
NT Department of Education, Darwin.

Most of us overestimate the role of words in communication between people. Other factors (sometimes called paralinguistic features) strongly influence what kind of message passes between people during conversations. These are features such as tone of voice, loudness, facial expression, body posture, and perhaps most important all the experiences the speaker and listener have previously shared. A good example of the way communication is more than words is that terms of abuse can be both expressions of extreme anger and of close affection. However, when members of two cultures are trying to communicate, there are all of these same factors present, except that the "same" factor may mean something different in the second culture. Different cultural values and a different range of attitudes about personal rights, may all be expressed through speech and the behaviours which supplement speech.

The format of introducing each item of "manners" in the form of a question or an imagined real-life episode is designed to help a teacher in an Aboriginal school imagine himself/herself in a situation of potential misunderstanding. If a Balanda reader's contact with Yolngu is almost all within the Balanda domain (which at Milingimbi is mainly the world of the Balanda's work and operates mainly from 8 am to 5.30 pm, Monday to Friday) and with the most Westernised Yolngu then much of what follows will appear biased observation. But if the Balanda is trying to relate to Yolngu in both their world and his own, then the observations are valid and meaningful. That these experiences implied or mentioned below still happen at a place like Milingimbi which was first settled by Balanda in 1923, reflects the fact that Aboriginal values and behaviour patterns die hard. Those behaviours associated with verbal communication described in this paper are part of the cultural background with which Yolngu children enter school at Milingimbi, and which continue to be very real for all their school experience here. Therefore, a Balanda teacher can hardly ignore the reality of the children's expectations about verbal behaviour as they seek to relate to the children and possibly help them to become bicultural people.

Footnote

This is an expanded version of the paper "Yolngu Rules of Interpersonal Communication", Developing Education, Vol. 4, No. 5, Darwin, April, 1977. The title comes from the practice of small Yolngu boys at Milingimbi sometimes saying self-righteously, "Have Your Manners" to one of their peers who is doing something "un-Western" in a balanda person's domain.

Before leaving this subject I suggest to new teachers that because of the basic ways to avoid being bad mannered is to communicate effectively, they shouldn't be afraid to switch to English when their level of Aboriginal vernacular is poorer than the level of English of the Aboriginal person to whom they are speaking.

Bill was a very efficient fast moving, hardworking chap who was always on time and was extremely conscientious about getting a certain amount of work done each day. He believed he was behaving this way because it was right and because he was "keeping the standards up" for the sake of the Yolngu. He felt sure they would respect his "obvious sincerity", but gradually became discouraged because so many Yolngu appeared to be not taking life very seriously, and even appeared to be irresponsible.

In white society we would accept Bill, provided he behaved like this during working hours and was able to relax and take things a bit easy outside working hours. In an Aboriginal community Bill is up against some difficulties if he is not willing to learn to discern when to relax and take things a bit easy during working hours. His difficulties arise from the fact that if he is job oriented rather than person oriented all the time, Yolngu will not learn to respect him for his "obvious sincerity" but will at best partially accept him, not as a real person but because he's like so many other Balanda they've observed before. When I said "all the time" that really means "all the time during work-time", because work time is the only time Yolngu will be with Bill very much.

Much to my surprise he quite enjoyed it, and I was later to learn that Yolngu gave this particular white lady wide latitude because of her particular personality and the degree of affection she seemed to be able to both give and draw from them. But we should not define general rules from the behaviour of unusual people.

If a Yolngu agrees on Friday that he will go fishing with you on Saturday morning and doesn't turn up on Saturday morning, is he being rude to you?

From a Yolngu attitude to verbal commitments, No. If it were always the Balanda-initiated verbal agreements that the Yolngu did not adhere to, the explanation would probably be that Yolngu dislike verbal confrontations and as a consequence frequently say "what the Balanda wants to hear". But many of the instances of failure to meet verbal commitments involve Yolngu-initiated commitments. A deeper analysis reveals that from a Yolngu point of view, there need be no direct connection between what he does and what he promises to do. Also, from his point of view, it seems very strange behaviour to carry out a commitment to a pleasure, if what looked like a pleasure yesterday has turned into a chore today. He is much more pragmatic in his reaction to present circumstances and in this context less governed by what the Balanda call 'principles of keeping to your word'. What his behaviour really means is that 'extenuating circumstances' become valid at a different level for him than for the Balanda. For example, if a Balanda committed himself to a fishing trip and broke his ankle, his failure to make it to the trip would be considered as valid 'extenuating circumstances'. In contrast, if your potential Yolngu friend agreed on Friday night to go fishing on Saturday, but on Saturday morning feels very tired, that tiredness probably qualifies in his value system as 'extenuating circumstances'. A Balanda will often, without thinking, interpret this difference between the two value systems as rudeness on the part of the Yolngu.

Also, modern Aborigines tend to live in two fairly clearly separated domains of behaviour (which are supported by domains of language, domains of values, domains of different orientation to time, etc). One of these domains is the Balanda world of technological work, cash economy, attendance at school, and clocks, and so on; and the other is the Yolngu world of relatives, close social atmosphere, independent choice of action and a more casual attitude to time, and so on. One of the effects on the Yolngu of living in these two domains of behaviour is that a commitment made in one domain fades (sometimes into insignificance) when from the other domain. The Yolngu domain is still by far the stronger in terms of value and definitions of social responsibilities, and so often wins over commitments made in the Balanda domain. If you 'followed up' your Yolngu friend in the camp and said, "What about our arrangement?" you would probably get some co-operation, but that involves a new pressure and is not what is being discussed here. And of course, if the verbal commitment involves something that is personally important to the Yolngu, one that still seems important on Saturday morning, that is, he will meet it. But it remains true that one of the hardest features of Yolngu behaviour for the new Balanda to get used to is their frequent failure to link verbal commitments to actual behaviour made in this community by the Yolngu themselves. It is because of behaviour like this that the Yolngu gain the reputation among Balanda of being very subjective people and of 'living in the present'.

Is it inexcusable that having agreed to go fishing on Saturday morning, and having decided to change his mind and not go, he fails to come and let you know?

From the Yolngu point of view, No. To begin with, he hasn't done anything as definite as 'change his mind'. Yesterday when he made the commitment, his intention to actually go fishing was probably serious. However, he wasn't saying 'I hereby agree to take you fishing tomorrow, come hell or high water'.

He was saying "At the moment, I feel that I'd really like to take you fishing in the morning": Yolngu tend to be opportunist and to act on impulse in the sense that they tend to be ready to react to opportunities as they present themselves, rather than to carefully plan for them. Even when a Molngu ceremony involves much planning, no one can be sure what day or week it will actually begin. (This may be an adaptation to the small degree of control they had over the physical universe in their 'hunting and gathering' heritage). In other words, a more Yolngu way to arrange a fishing trip on Saturday morning would be to go down to the beach when you were ready and if there were someone there with whom you'd like to go fishing, then suggest it and go. Finally, it's worth remembering that the system can work both ways: if you have committed yourself to a fishing trip with a Yolngu but don't meet the commitment, you probably haven't spoiled his day and he won't think any the less of you.

If you give a Yolngu a lift in your boat, say from the mainland to Milingimbi Island, and when you land on Milingimbi beach he gets out and walks away - with or without a friendly smile or nod - and offers no 'thanks' and no help to put the motor or boat away, is he being rude?

No. From his point of view, people normally do things for one or two reasons; either because they want to, or else because they have some obligation to fulfil to specific relations. He automatically thinks that you give him the lift because you wanted to, so there's no need for an expression of thanks. (The fact that there is no vernacular tradition of saying 'thanks' immediately after the event is consistent with this view). If the man to whom you gave the lift is friendly the next time you meet him, it might be more because he now knows you a little through shared experience, than because he's 'being grateful' for what you did for him. Yolngu seldom expect 'public spiritedness' from others and normally respect your right to do what you want to do, which apparently included giving him a lift.

If the Yolngu involved is a young person, he'll probably say 'thank you' because he's learned it from Balanda contact; but you still may not get any help in putting the outboard motor away, unless you ask for it. In other words, if the expression of 'thanks' after receiving assistance is looked at as a socio-linguistic rule of Balanda society, then the young Yolngu has learned the linguistic aspect of the behaviour, but not the social attitude with which Balanda associate it. Again, from his point of view, there is no need to feel any obligation to you because the main reason you did anything was because you wanted to, and he won't sympathise with you or even understand any motives you may have of "needing to help the Aborigines". This is not to say that we Balanda teachers should not encourage people to help others for the sake of helping them. It is only to say that we should interpret this sort of Yolngu behaviour towards us when it happens, from their point of view.

An enthusiastic new teacher decided she ought to get to know Yolngu people "in their situation" so she built up courage and went down to the village on Saturday morning and went straight up to a group of people sitting under a tree and sat down with them and bravely tried to think of some topics of conversation to break the stoney silence which met her. After a few questions such as "Do you like living here?" - which did not receive satisfactory answers - she left feeling hurt and embarrassed.

This teacher had failed to realise that although Aboriginal places of living are largely unwallled environments they are not public places. Each Yolngu family will have a territory which carries roughly the equivalent amount of privacy as a house and front and back yard in white society. If you observe closely you will see that when other Yolngu walk by various camps that are not their own they don't look round - they look at the ground as they walk or straight ahead. You will also discover that some people heading for their own distant camp will go down onto the beach - not for the pleasure of walking the long way round on the sand, but because it is expected that they don't invade the privacy of other groups..

People actually keep to "paths" when they do walk through camps. They are not simply "walking through the camp". Also if you sit in one camp and ask questions about people who live two camps away within easy vision, you might be surprised how little people want to talk about them, or even how little they actually know about them. For example, they may genuinely not know that a "neighbour" has gone off to Elcho. It is not well mannered to be over curious either about them or their neighbours.

Aboriginal people are generous and hospitable people, but their behaviours tend to be rule governed, as behaviours in our society often are. For example, if you want to visit a person that you don't know very well you need to have a legitimate reason for the visit. Once this purpose for the visit has been achieved, a relaxed social time with no particular "point" might follow. Perhaps the best way to approach a camp (which corresponds to knocking on a door) is to go to the edge of the camp's area and catch the attention of somebody there and ask for the person you need to see. Either the person you talk to or the required person will beckon you on or call out to you to come on and you will be invited to sit on a blanket. (The laying out of a blanket is a frequent act of welcome in N.E. Arnhem Land).

When young Aboriginal men are sometimes observed walking along holding hands what does that mean?

It means that this is a way of expressing friendship and is part of personal communication. (That Russian men kiss each other on the cheek instead of shaking hands, and Egyptian men stand very close to each other while talking, is the same kind of thing). Often when a Yolngu enjoys a joke they will grab the arm of the joke-teller while laughing. If an Aboriginal should touch you more than other white people would, normally you should take this as a compliment and as an expression of acceptance and affection.

On the subject of physical contact, teachers should refrain from slapping children in their class. Slapping children is much less frequent in Aboriginal society and slapping someone else's children almost unheard of. Such an act by a teacher is likely to be interpreted by the parents as an extremely rude or hostile act.

Is it reasonable to expect Yolngu children to respond to all the questions they are asked in the classroom?

Np. Because

- a) In Yolngu society, it is bad manners to be too curious or inquisitive, and Yolngu passively resist answering too many questions because it goes against their notions of independence and privacy.
- b) Yolngu children generally do not experience in their own culture the use of questioning as a teaching technique or the question-and-answer technique of transferring knowledge. It follows that the Yolngu can't understand why a teacher is asking questions when he knows the answers. (There is one setting in Yolngu society where they ask questions when they know the answer. This is when they are angry and make a loud speech in public. Here one of the techniques of verbal challenge is to 'ask' rhetorical questions such as, "Do you think I don't know what you've been doing, eh?" These questions are never answered, and children expect not to have to answer similar questions from teachers). This simple inability to understand the function of the question as a teaching technique is enough to reduce Yolngu children to a confused silence.
- c) Hypothetical questions are an even worse problem because they are never found in Yolngu speech. Even if Yolngu are asked a hypothetical question in a very real setting and it has immediate relevance and they seriously try to understand it,

they still often misunderstand because they will transpose the hypothetical setting to a literal setting. For example, if you say "Would you rather have a banana or an orange?", and they say "orange", they assume you have both an orange and a banana right there to give them. Or, if you said, "If X tried to marry Y, what would her relatives do about it?", (presumably you're trying to work out the marriage system) the listener will assume that you think that X really wants to marry Y, and will reply "But she doesn't". (It is not inconsistent with this example, that what may appear as hypothetical questions about the ideal kinship system pose no difficulty for the Yolngu because here they are dealing with a formalised reality rather than with the hypothetical behaviour of individuals).

d) In the area of command-questions or request-questions, Yolngu children behave very differently from Balanda children. In the Yolngu camp no one ever acts on the first request (e.g. "(will you) go and get some firewood?" or "(will you) get some water?"). The reaction of listeners suggests that they think the requester is tentatively testing a vague idea out loud, and no one thinks the requester is serious until the third or fourth mentioning and then the listeners comply if the circumstances are appropriate. From experience, the listeners know that suggestions and requests are often casually made and then dropped. An experienced Balanda teacher said, "One of the most difficult communication problems in the classroom is the number of times I have to ask for something to be done before the action takes place (although if I ask them to go and play the drums they're off before the sentence is finished). I'm sure they understand such questions or requests the first time, but are preconditioned by rarely being forced to do anything (and never forced to do it on the first request) to keep wondering if you're going to insist. The indication that you will insist is that you ask 3 or 4 times".

e) Shyness in the company of Balanda is probably more a barrier to answering questions for small Yolngu children than it is for Balanda children. It is a real part of Balanda culture to teach children to answer when spoken to. Yolngu children are more

allowed to behave as they wish, and to express their independence by choosing not to answer.

- f) Although Yolngu are expected to conform to many social norms, it is also a Yolngu ethic for individuals to maintain a right to independent action where that action does not go against some social requirement to which they are expected to conform. One of the common areas where Yolngu express this right of independent action is in choosing whether or not to answer questions. Often Yolngu simply choose not to answer questions. This seems very strange to Balanda, because we always answer each other's questions even if by an evasion. Yolngu simply feel no social obligation to answer questions - they do so if it suits them.
- g) Yolngu will sometimes answer what they think you want them to say, (for example, "Yes" when they know the real answer is "No", but they think you hope it will be "Yes") just to avoid any possibility of direct verbal confrontation or the likelihood of further questions.
- h) If you are in a habit of phrasing a question in the form of alternatives in English, it might prove fruitful to slow down and work on one alternative at a time. For example, rather than say "Should we work on the boat on Saturday or go camping?" it might be more productive to say "There's that boat to finish and there's that camping trip. What would you like to do?"

If Yolngu children sometimes resist answering teachers' questions, isn't it inconsistent that they often ask many questions in the most frustrating way in class?

No. The English teacher often uses the question-answer approach to transfer and clarify knowledge. This is not a typical Yolngu way of doing things. A number of Balanda teachers at Milingimbi have noticed how rare it is for Yolngu students to ask questions that reveal curiosity or a hunger for knowledge or a drive "to know". (An oversimplified explanation is that it is possible that Yolngu, as a religious society, have a religious or phenomenological rationale which allows them to accept much of what they see as "natural phenomena".

For example, a magic trick, dramatic chemical experiment or the workings of a motorcar are accepted with less wonder by Yolngu than by Balanda. In contrast, Balanda society, which is largely secular, seeks to have scientific or "logical" explanations for what they see: hence the different use of a questioning approach to Knowledge). On the other hand, Yolngu students often ask many questions of teachers, but these questions are of a special nature; they are procedural questions: "Will I use the English book?" "Are we going to the Library?" "Is this right?" (One Balanda teacher at Milingimbi, who had a very good relationship with the students but who sometimes became frustrated with the children asking "Will I use my English book?" ad nauseum, once replied, No, use your Russian book", and the student happily went ahead with the English Book). This type of question might indicate an insecurity in the classroom situation or a lack of real understanding about what school education is all about. Although teachers should be glad when Yolngu children in their classes are sufficiently confident of their relationship with their teachers to allow them to ask questions incessantly, they do find the situation frustrating because most of the questions have nothing to do with learning. The children are not being inconsistent by often asking, but seldom answering questions, because their questions and the teacher's questions are of very different types.

Patsi had heard about Aboriginal co-operation rather than competition and wondered whether praising children for good work might not be wise because it inspired competition.

Patsi is thinking well and is onto something that should be thought out. One aspect of good manners surely is to save people embarrassment or ostracism or teasing. Therefore the subject of praise is part of the matter of manners in a cross-cultural setting. It has already been said that Aboriginal children, especially boys, go through a lot of training for personal independence. Independence training is based on the need in a hunting and gathering economy for each person to be able to fend for himself if need be.

Thus young Yolngu are trained to do things for internal reasons and not external rewards. Praise is one form of external reward. Aboriginal parents do praise their children but only intermittently. This does not mean that it is wrong for a teacher to praise - in fact most children like to do well and to be noticed to be doing well. But this praise should not be too public. If a teacher makes a public fuss over a child other children might tease and "level" that child. This "levelling" is consistent with training for independence, because when an individual rises too far above his fellows this can be interpreted as a bid to exercise control over his fellows. But personal warmth is not misinterpreted as praise, so perhaps the best approach is to express praise to individuals in relative privacy and to make an attitude of personal interest, warmth and good-will the most pervasive and public form of praise and encouragement.

Why do some Yolngu people seem to periodically change their names, and why are they offended if Balanda keep using the old name?

Probably because someone has died who has the same name or a name that is phonetically similar to it. As children are often named after their mari's (grandmothers or grandfathers) there will be many cases of two or three people of the same name on any large settlement, and as these people all have more than one name, this does not cause any problem. The respectful thing to do is simply to conform to local contemporary usage.

It is also better to ask a third party a Yolngu person's name rather than that person himself, as Aboriginal people are often reticent about naming their own Aboriginal name. (There are a few other words which perhaps should be avoided in Aboriginal communities, and these can easily be found out from more experienced Balanda people. For example, in N.E. Arnhem Land "Black" is not yet "beautiful", and to refer to people as "Skinny" is perhaps a bigger insult than in non-Aboriginal society).

Is talking clearly, forthrightly and strongly, likely to be more offensive to Yolngu than to Balanda?

Yes. This is probably more true for Yolngu adults than for the children, although it is often true for children too. ("Strong talk" in the case of children does not include the common semi-affectionate bellowing of mothers or grandmothers). Several times a Balanda teacher was observed to "speak strongly" to a young Yolngu child who was very clearly in the wrong. However, by speaking in such a manner, the teacher lost the initiative because in the student's eyes his crime had been overshadowed by a greater one committed by the teacher, and the student said with all guilt gone, "But you spoke roughly to me". "Strong talk" in Yolngu culture is associated with personal animosity or anger, especially where there is a difference of opinion. A statement such as "There's nothing personal in what I'm going to say, but...." is meaningless to Yolngu. They have no objective, impersonal-debate form of interpersonal conversation. Often, in my own home, several Yolngu children, teenagers, or adults have sat with horror and amazement written all over their faces while observing quite hard or "heated" debates between groups of Balanda, at any moment expecting them to come to blows, and somewhat confused when one of the debators laughs or offers coffee all around. (It is not suggested that Balanda teachers should never "speak strongly" to a class. In many cases there may be nothing else the teacher can find to do. The main point is that "strong speaking" has such a different function and nature in Yolngu language that it is very difficult for Balanda teachers to use strong speaking in an effective but inoffensive way).

Before leaving this topic perhaps two more related points should be made: (1) If you need to verbally discipline a student strongly try as much as possible to do it in relative privacy, because the shame and embarrassment caused by being "dressed down" in public is more acute in Yolngu society than in Western society, because it can so easily be interpreted as

personal animosity. (2) You should be extremely careful of "dressing down" senior Yolngu men and women, or clan leaders. If you do this, you will not only offend that person deeply, but will also offend all the members of his clan or extended family who observe the scene. "Blood is thicker than water" is truer for Yolngu society than in Western Society!

If a Yolngu asks you to do a favour, something that seems unreasonable or impractical, is he being disrespectful to you in some way? (For example, asking you to lend your outboard motor, or to take him in your truck to get a load of firewood just before dark as you sit down to tea).

No. Because

- a) Yolngu still don't know many of the subtleties of what is considered reasonable and what is considered unreasonable in Balanda culture, and one of the few ways open to them to find out is to build up enough courage to ask. Not only are Balanda cultural expectations difficult to fully understand as such, but a wide variety of Balanda are found in Aboriginal communities and range from the liberal share-my-stuff type to the colonialistic keep-your-distance type. Asking a favour is a very pragmatic and sure way of finding out what sort of person the new Balanda is and how much he will be willing to do for various Yolngu.
- b) Another reason the Balanda might misinterpret the above Yolngu action is because normally Balanda will think very carefully about how a listener is likely to respond before he asks a favour. Here the responsibility for judging the reasonableness of the request is largely taken by the asker. In Balanda culture a refusal to grant a request is embarrassing and unpleasant and the onus of avoiding a refusal-situation is therefore placed on the asker. The asker is required by Balanda culture to ask only for things he genuinely feels are reasonable and likely to be granted. This restriction is not found in Yolngu culture.

If a Yolngu is asking the favour, he will normally leave the responsibility for judging its reasonableness up to the listener. In Yolngu culture, this is not a harsh thing to do, because the Yolngu is prepared to accept a very "lame" excuse for why the answer must be "No". That is, very lame in a Balanda's opinion, such as saying, "I haven't got any petrol", and then after a brief lapse of time driving off. Balanda are often embarrassed when saying "no" because they feel awkward at offering a really lame excuse. However, the Yolngu asker will normally accept the euphemistic "no" (i.e. the excuse) without any personal feeling of rebuff. (This is one aspect of Yolngu sociolinguistic behaviour that is similar to a practice that is common in at least parts of Papua New Guinea, where, on being refused an "unreasonable" request, the asker will say "Mi traime tasol" and go off with a broad grin - all of which means, "I'm only trying, that's all; don't take it too seriously; no hard feelings").

Incidentally, it would be wrong to get the impression that Yolngu are always asking for favours in an insensitive way regardless of your feelings in return. If you really don't want to get involved in the give and take, they will soon find that out and leave you right alone.

Another case potential strain over the asking of favours is simply the problem of frequent poor control of English on the Yolngu's side. For example, a Yolngu saying "You give me this?" which is meant as a harmless "mi traime tasol" question can be interpreted by the Balanda as "pushy" and "grasping". Occasionally, of course it might be, but most of the time it's not. (Another solution is to learn the Aboriginal language if you can).

If a Yolngu family asks you to take them to some crabbing spot two or three miles away in your truck, and you say "O.K.", but after I finish this job", are they likely to believe you mean exactly what you say?

Unless they are quite well versed in Balanda ways, No. Because Yolngu seek to avoid direct verbal confrontation much more than Balanda do, and they have a system of making polite excuses instead of saying a direct "No". This system enables a refusal to be hurtful to neither asker nor listener and allows all parties to keep their right to independent action. The problem is, however, that in the situation described here, the Yolngu family will often think you're really saying, "No" and they will disappear. And being opportunists, they will probably be off asking someone else. This might cause you (the Balanda) to be annoyed because, half an hour later when you start up your truck to take them to the crabbing spot, you find that you have to wait because several of the children are away asking someone else to take them. But remember that they were probably not at all upset at what they thought was your "no", and will be most surprised that for some reason you seem to have changed your mind!

If you are telling a story and the audience is "restless", i.e. members of the audience are quietly talking to one another, sometimes laughing quietly at each other's private jokes, or gazing at the ground in apparent boredom, does that mean they are not listening?

No. although (as with some of the other points above) a continuum is involved. Yolngu can sit in very still attention if the subject is emotionally and immediately absorbing to them, although even then the major speaker will not be the sole person talking, as members of the audience still reserve the right to talk quietly among themselves. And of course, at the other extreme, if the audience is in an uproar or talking so loudly that the speaker cannot be heard, then of course they are not listening. But generally speaking, a Yolngu audience contains more people moving about, than would a Balanda audience. At Milingimbi this year, a new Balanda teacher was surprised to discover from a series of "comprehension questions" given to the students later, that restlessness in the audience while he was telling a story did not necessarily mean that they weren't listening. On another occasion a very sophisticated, confident Yolngu lady was giving a lesson on Gupapuyngu pronunciation to new Balanda school staff.

Their careful attention motionless behaviour and concentrated staring (in other words, a perfect Balanda audience) so unnerved her that she refused to teach subsequent lessons. Only tolerance and experience can help the Balanda teacher know when a class restlessness during a teacher's talk or while he is reading out loud, is productive cultural behaviour or when it is unproductive play at the expense of learning.

If you pass a Yolngu on the road and say, "Hullo" and there's no response, is he being rude?

No. Many Yolngu people are extremely diplomatic and respectful to Balanda and often go out of their way to wave or smile or say "Hullo", but such greetings and other "small talk" are not part of Yolngu culture. A normal pattern when Yolngu pass each other on the road is to ignore each other, and if an avoidance relationship is involved, normally one or both of the people will seek a wider detour. Though generally not as diplomatic as older people, most younger people will return a greeting, but they also will appear inconsistent because, for example, someone who greeted you the first three or four times, may ignore you on the fifth. What most Balanda feel in such a situation is some unexplained animosity from the Yolngu towards them personally, but really what is probably happening is that greetings are something the Yolngu have superficially adopted from Balanda ways, and when they are upset and tense about something in their own life such adopted behaviours become very low priority and thus cease to function.

(One of the aspects of Yolngu culture that many Balanda do not understand is the amount of tension and stress with which Yolngu have to live under in modern settlement conditions. This ignorance about Yolngu tensions is partly because Yolngu and Balanda see very little of each other outside working hours. Also the continuance of false stereotypes that Balanda have about how "Aborigines" are "peace-loving", "co-operative". "happy-go-lucky", "generous", and how their "kinship system works like clock-work", etc. merely furthers ignorance about Yolngu tensions.

There are also causes of tension with which Balanda often fail to sympathise, such as those caused by social change, and pressure from white society to conform to white cultural values. And there are tensions brought by alcohol and by living in a large community with other Yolngu groups who are perhaps traditional enemies. One young Yolgnu man at Milingimbi, who has a very responsible Balanda job that he performs efficiently, just doesn't greet Balanda, thus making it awkward for some to feel friendly towards him. A Balanda lady who knows him well explained that he has simply drawn the line at what he can and cannot handle emotionally in this modern contact situation. One of the Balanda requirements that is too hard for him is the responsibility of always being alert to give greetings.

Why can't the Yolngu person conform to my Balanda rules of verbal behaviour sometimes? Aren't you implying that in modern Aboriginal communities outsiders should always try to conform to traditional Aboriginal manners?

Believe me, no matter how hard you try to meet Yolngu people at least half way there will be enough occasions in which they are expected to conform wholly to white patterns of good manners. For example, there will always be a number of new visitors, or a number of the more "colonialistic" Balanda who feel no obligation to modify their behaviour patterns to fit in with Aboriginal expectations, and furthermore, Aborigines get exposure to Balanda manners when they go to town or to a residential college. On a more formal teaching level, Balanda manners (preferably role playing in various simulated settings) should be part of oral English lessons. This is a much less hurtful way to allow Aborigines to learn white manners, than for them to learn through a series of misunderstandings.

Another answer to this question is Yes, it is reasonable to expect Yolngu to conform to your manners sometimes, but you should choose your situations sensibly. For example, if Yolngu visit you in your home, it would seem to be reasonable that they conform a good deal to your normal system of doing things. In fact the Yolngu will probably expect this. Then of course, the reverse would also operate: the more obviously you are on his ground (such as in his camp or at a Yolngu ceremony) the more it should be thought reasonable to conform to his pattern of behaviour. (Who's "ground" is the school? That is a subject beyond the scope of this paper).

But the old attitude always seems to keep coming up "But won't they eventually have to learn the white man's manners?" The answer is probably Yes, but some non-Aboriginal people learning Aboriginal manners will not stop Aborigines learning Balanda manners. (The questions come to mind, Why are we Balanda so resistant to conforming to a few of a host's basic behaviour patterns? and Why are we Balanda more intent on teaching Aborigines without at least demonstrating that we are prepared to treat them as equal people?) The first step for a teacher is to try to establish meaningful personal relations, and some decent manners helps this along greatly. After having established meaningful relationships with Aborigines then we should worry about teaching them.

Conclusion

Many of the rules of verbal behaviour discussed above might seem to the reader to be operating outside the school context, and therefore not to be important to the teacher in the Aboriginal school. But there are two main reasons why an understanding of sociolinguistic rules in Yolngu speech and behaviour will help the Balanda classroom teacher. Firstly, a Yolngu child's assessment of him/her in the classroom will be more based upon what he is as a person than what he does as a teacher. Yolngu base judgements mostly upon the former.

And the Balanda teacher's reputation as a person will be as much established by his behaviour outside the school as in it. It is also important to realise that what Yolngu adults think of the teacher as a person will in the long run influence his effectiveness with children in the classroom. Secondly, a new Balanda teacher's feelings (as well as Yolngu feelings) can be deeply hurt by misunderstandings, and misunderstandings can easily turn into contempt. If a Balanda teacher has "written off the Yolngu", the feeling cannot be hidden from students, and again the teacher's effectiveness is lessened. To be forewarned is to be less hurt and to hurt others less. It is hoped that a better understanding of some rules of Aboriginal interpersonal communication might enable more tolerance, joy and effectiveness in living and teaching in an Aboriginal community.

Further reading:

O'Brien, Gordon, Plooi, Daniel and Whitelaw, Albert, Culture Training Manual for Teachers in Aboriginal Communities, 1975, Sciences, Flinders University, S.A. Research funded by Department of Aboriginal Affairs.