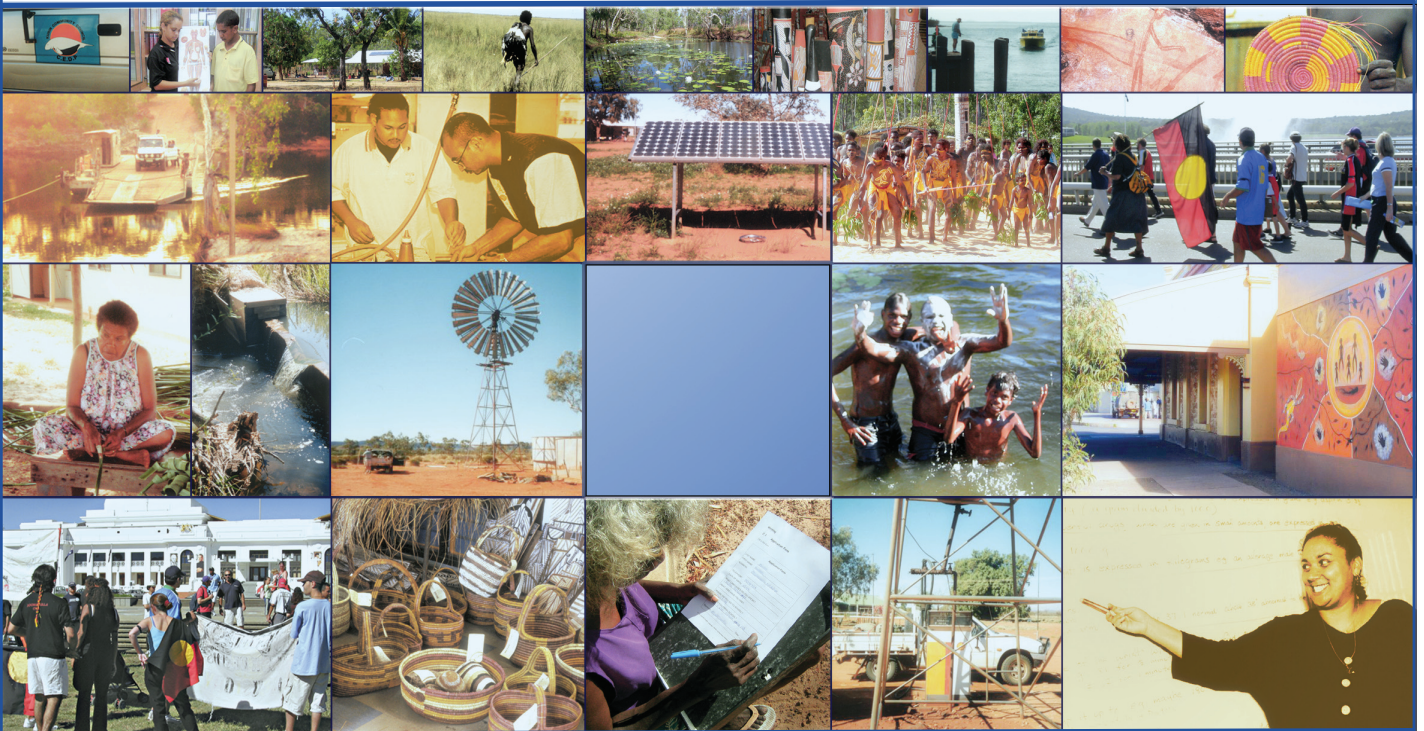ANU

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Lifespan Learning and Literacy for Young Adults in Remote Indigenous Communities

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Rarely do accounts of Indigenous youth in remote Australia focus on young people as active agents, creatively shaping their own learning beyond formal institutional settings. This is not because positive examples of youth learning do not exist, but rather they are often invisible or unrecognised because they occur in contexts or settings we may not notice or think to explore.

Lifespan Learning and Literacy for Young Adults in Remote Indigenous Communities (2007-2010)[1] is a participatory research project that aims to explore, document and showcase the many ways in which Indigenous youth— aged between 16 and 25—are extending their learning, expanding their oral and written language skills and in particular embracing digital culture in community-based domains outside of mainstream learning environments. The project has focused on a small number of 'best practice' learning projects and programs in remote Indigenous communities.

Our research has shown that learning is fostered through interest-driven engagement in projects and activities that matter to young people, and that these learning environments effectively stimulate the acquisition and development of language and multimodal literacies, organisational learning and social enterprise. In the cases we have studied, we observe young people developing high level skills and knowledge and creating new cultural productions often leading to enterprise generation and employment. Their intent participation in learning has also resulted in some important social outcomes: a positive sense of identity, the development of and transition to mature roles and responsibilities, an increased sense of confidence in engagement with the outside world and an enhanced quality of life.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND THEORY

Institutional models of education are struggling to attract, and hold onto, young learners in remote Indigenous communities, and alphabetic literacy practices are not integral to everyday life in most remote communities.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF LITERACY AND LEARNING

In mainstream Australia literacy acquisition builds on the foundation of formal schooling and the intergenerational transmission of literacy practices. Importantly, it also involves complex interactive engagement and participation in other processes, practices and contexts requiring literacy that are meaningful and purposeful at a social and community level. By contrast, in many remote Indigenous communities literacy learning in school is relatively new and has been experienced by only a few generations. Indeed, literacy is understood by many young people as something done primarily within the environs of school. Given the recency of literacy in such places, there has been little time for the cultural processes— that is the social habits and attitudes associated with everyday literacy practices that underpin success at school—to seep into family life and for intergenerational transmission to take hold. The emergence of everyday literacy practice in this context is dependent upon access to and control over the artefacts of literacy; such practice in turn is critical for the development of the concomitant habits, attitudes, values and dispositions associated with literacy.

Over recent decades international researchers have shifted the emphasis away from a traditional, cognitivist view of literacy as a set of individual technical skills possessed, or conversely lacked, towards studies of the relationship between language and literacy use in social context (Cook-Gumperz 1986; Levine 1986; Maybin 1994; Prinsloo and Breier 1996). The 'New Literacy Studies' theorists have drawn on sociolinguistics and anthropology to view literacy in terms of 'social practice' (Maybin 2000; Street 1993). These researchers conceptualise literacy not in terms of skills and competencies, but as integral components of social events and practices. Their approach embodies the view that reading and writing 'only make sense' when studied in the context of the social and cultural—as well as historical, political and economic—practices 'of which they are but a part' (Gee 2000: 180). Other writers have explored the benefits of observation and participation in collaborative learning (Rogoff et al. 2003) by drawing on Vygotskyan ideas of activity theory and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). The application of a social theory of learning resonates in the remote Indigenous world, as it draws learning away from the focus on individual attainment of outcomes by embracing a participatory emphasis on learning and literacy practice that is of relevance to the social community or 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) to which learners belong. Consequently, we believe that for literacy learning to take hold in remote communities it must retain meaning and purpose over the changing domains and practices that span a person's life. Moreover, this meaning and purpose will only be transmitted to the following generation if literacies are practised by the current generation of young adult caregivers (Kral and Falk 2004; Kral and Schwab 2003; Nakata 2002).

NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND NEW IDENTITIES

This project builds on international and Australian research that goes against the grain of many deeply held popular and policy perceptions of Indigenous youth as 'trouble' or 'at risk' (Smyth and Hattam 2004; Varenne and McDermott 1999). While it cannot be denied that such young people do exist in some places, we are attracted to the exciting expressions of capacity and engagement by Indigenous youth we have observed in many remote communities. In working with such young people, we have gained new insights into the nature of learning, its varied shapes and sites, and how learning among young people often links to meaningful and productive activities that benefit families and communities. Importantly, we have

observed how these activities have been taken up by young people at a time in their lives that fits the normative practices and maturational cycles still prominent in many Indigenous communities. As young adults, they have reached the age where it is appropriate for them to begin taking on responsibilities, gaining skills and knowledge, and assuming leadership in their communities. In some of the project sites, we have observed that leadership is expressed in recording and protecting traditional knowledge; in others, we see the seeds of localised, new enterprises of a hybrid nature. Combining customary activities such as art or music with market opportunities is building a foundation for economic engagement in locations where opportunities for participation in the larger mainstream economy have been absent or rare.

In addition, we have observed among the young people participating in this project what Lave and Wenger (1991) have described as the clear link between learning and identity: in practice, to learn is to become a different person (Bartlett and Holland 2002). In other words, learning and the acquisition of literacy is not just about acquiring new skills but also about changing identity and representations of self (Barton et al. 2007:210). While our research is not a study of Indigenous identity, the ways in which young people engage in learning and with multimodal literacies appears to be a process whereby they shape and reshape their senses of self, often in positive and socially affirming ways. In no setting is this more tangible than in their engagement with new media and arts.

A LEARNING ENGAGEMENT GAP IN THE OUT–OF SCHOOL AND POST–SCHOOL YEARS

Recently, a growing body of international research has focused on youth-based organisations as sites for non-formal learning, particularly for marginalised youth in the out-of-school and post-school years. Researchers have increasingly turned their attention to locations—such as libraries, after-school programs, and museums—that structure learning experiences differently from those in school (Fine et al. 2000; Vadeboncoeur 2006). In Western societies, middle and upper-class families take for granted ensuring that their children participate in the 'regular extras': out-of-school activities, projects and programs or so-called 're-generative learning environments' (Heath 2007: 5-6). Yet for marginalised younf people, such activities are often non-existent.

Projects or activities that excite and engage youth (and which in some contexts may be additive to formal instruction) are being posited as alternative learning environments. Community youth groups are also being recognised as organisations that have the 'freedoms of time, space, activity and authority that schools as institutions seldom provide' (Heath and Street 2008: 5). Furthermore, writers suggest that arts-based projects provide a context for sustained learning that schools cannot match, and are judged by youth themselves as desirable activities in which to invest time (Heath 1998; Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Heath and Smyth 1999; Hull and Schultz 2002; McLaughlin et al. 1994). Programs incorporating digital technologies and multimedia productions have been noted as particularly conducive to multimodal literacy development. Digital technologies are enabling new forms of media production and the composition of multimodal texts that incorporate visual, oral, gestural and written modes of representation and communication (Gee 2003; Hull 2003; Hull and Nelson 2005; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Livingstone 2002; New London Group 1996; Osgerby 2004). It has been suggested (Soep 2006:199) that a 'second wave of fresh thinking about literacy' has been ushered in by digital technologies and their associated 'intertextualities', in tandem with the emergence of new social practices such as text messaging, social networking, and the uploading and downloading of photos, film and music on the internet and mobile phones (Ito et al. 2008).

METHODOLOGY, ORGANISATIONS/FIELD SITES AND RESEARCH STAFF

METHODS

The project methodology and conceptual framework for the project involves a range of methods including:

- A literature review;

- The collection and documentation of perceptions of opportunities and options for the development of community learning and literacy in non-school contexts;

- Ethnographic observations and interviews in projects and sites; and

- Limited collection of baseline data on post-school age adults including: education, training and employment background; and measures of language, literacy and numeracy competence.

ORGANISATIONS/FIELD SITES

Research has been carried out in conjunction with:

➢ **DJILPIN ARTS** *Aboriginal Corporation at Beswick (Wugularr), NT.*

Djilpin Arts is a community-owned arts organisation. It produces the annual Walking with Spirits Festival, supports a youth and media training project, and operates an arts retail business at Ghunmarn Culture Centre. Djilpin Arts emphasises both youth learning and enterprise development as priority areas. They have supported a digital learning project for young people and now employ youth to document community arts and cultural activities. Ghunmarn Culture Centre has trained and now employs young women to manage and operate the Centre. It also supports a café and beauty products enterprise (making soap and lip balm out of bush plants) as a youth-oriented project with an income generating focus.

<center>http://www.djilpinarts.org.au/</center>

➢ **NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI** *intergenerational language and arts project in Alice Springs, NT.*

The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* intergenerational language and arts project is one of many national arts and social change projects undertaken by BIG *h*ART community arts organisation. Based in Alice Springs, the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project began in 2004 and involves community members of all ages in an online Pitjantjatjara language teaching and preservation project, a professional national touring theatre performance (*Ngapartji Ngapartji*), and a variety of media and music workshops and projects based in Alice Springs and in Pitjantjatjara-speaking bush communities. The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project is underpinned by a commitment to language and culture maintenance and to facilitating learning through all aspects of its work, including the provision of literacy and learning support for young people. Additionally, the project has taken on an advocacy role for Aboriginal language maintenance.

<center>http://www.ngapartji.org/</center>

➢ **LIBRARIES AND KNOWLEDGE CENTRES** *at Lajamanu and Ti Tree, NT.*

The Northern Territory Library (NTL) supports 22 remote community Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) across the Territory. In some LKCs young people are being trained to use the Our Story archival database program, taking responsibility for archiving and documenting community knowledge and engaging in cultural maintenance activities as the facilitators of digital media. At Lajamanu young people have developed media skills with PAW Media and Communications, and have worked with NTL to set up the Lajamanu *Nganju* Our Story archival database in the recently opened LKC. Throughout 2008 and 2009, a group of Batchelor Institute *Own Language Work* students at Ti Tree has been working on an oral history

project. Young women have documented accounts of life on cattle stations and this history is an important part of local Anmatyerr identity. A collaboration with NTL through the Ti Tree LKC ensures that the oral histories are archived in the *Anmatyerr Angkety* (Anmatyerr Stories) database.

http://www.ntl.nt.gov.au/about_us/knowledgecentres

➢ **NGAANYATJARRA MEDIA** *at Wingellina, WA.*

Ngaanyatjarra Media is located at Wingellina, some 700 kms from Alice Springs, and operates across the Ngaanyatjarra region. It is responsible for radio, film, and music production, broadcasting and training and promotes language and culture maintenance. Since 2003 Ngaanyatjarra Media has established Telecentres to provide public access computers containing information and applications that are meaningful to local people. Over the last few years this has been extended to non-formal workshops to teach local young musicians the GarageBand music recording software. Musicians now independently record and produce their own CDs which are then distributed for sale through Aboriginal music retail outlets.

http://www.waru.org/ngmedia/index.html

➢ **YOUTH PROGRAMS** *at Yuendumu, Nyirripi, Willowra and Lajamanu, NT.*

Youth Programs in the Warlpiri region are supported by the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation and the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT). These youth program projects incorporate a partnership with PAW Media and Communications for youth media training. Youth programs support young people in ongoing film and editing projects and provide regular access to computers so young people can use iTunes, download digital photos, and write texts. Additionally, the *Jaru Pirrjirdi* (Strong Voices) Project supports the development of young people between the ages of 17 and 30 by providing a range of programs and a community service structure through which they can engage in meaningful and productive community activity.

http://www.clc.org.au/Building_the_bush/wett.html

http://www.mttheo.org/home.htm

http://www.pawmedia.com.au/radio.htm

➢ **ALICE SPRINGS PUBLIC LIBRARY**

The Alice Springs Public Library provides an Indigenous-friendly environment where young people can access digital and textual resources. The *Akaltye Antheme* section has Indigenous-oriented books, magazines and the Indigi-links computer network. Additionally people can access computers, the internet, wireless TV and music systems, videos and DVDs, as well as books, magazines, pencils and paper. While observations were carried out at Alice Springs Public Library, there were no youth research participants from this site involved in the project.

http://www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/astc_site/library/special_collections

RESEARCHERS AND KEY PROJECT STAFF

Dr Jerry Schwab is the project's Chief Investigator and Dr Inge Kral is an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow. Inge has been the primary on-the-ground researcher and identified and worked in the various field sites during 2008-2009, developing relationships, observing activities and interviewing young people and project facilitators. Professor Shirley Brice Heath from Brown and Stanford Universities in the USA has been an important collaborator and advisor to the project.

Additionally, in March 2009 15 young people and facilitators from six research sites came together for a one week workshop at Thakeperte Outstation near Alice Springs. The workshop shifted the research dynamic and the key youth participants understood that they were part of a bigger conversation; the project quickly evolved into a reciprocal learning and research relationship. These young researchers had already been highly self-reflective about their own learning processes, and the workshop opened the way to learning from each other and sharing ideas. The young people in this project have exercised agency in the research process and in their own self-representation.

THE FINDINGS

> Young people have been taking up the challenge – learning and doing things for themselves. The young people are like the eyes for the old people seeing into the future ... It's not up to someone else to show the way we are or control how we are seen. We are trying to do this ourselves in our own work. We are watching too. You can see the young people standing up for themselves, speaking out. Now is the right time for people to take notice. (West 2009)
>
> <div align="right">L.M. West community elder, Warburton Youth Arts Project.</div>

In this research we have noticed that although many young people may be walking away from mainstream models of compulsory schooling and training, they are not rejecting learning. Instead, and importantly, our study indicates that when alternative learning opportunities are provided, young people are participating and successful outcomes are being attained. Our research shows that through engagement in personally and locally meaningful projects, youth are forming the understandings, skills and competencies they require to enter young adulthood as bilingual, bicultural beings—drawing on the language and culture transmitted by their elders, but also transforming it. Young learners are also developing the linguistic and conceptual tools, in addition to the work-oriented habits and attitudes, required to move towards responsible adult roles. Significantly, many are doing this outside of school or post-school training and so remain invisible to many policy-makers and government officials.

> Those programs out in the community, I like to call them the invisible programs they are so precious for people out there ... without having someone watching over them, it's free to come and to share something.... People should really look into it and then see the outcomes. Come out to these places and be part of that, you know and share with these young people, you know, and see the different kind of programs like Deadly Mob or Mt Theo, you know. Please, they should come out you know and just spend a week or three days is good enough so that you can get the whole picture of what is really happening. You know, you'll see plenty of smiling faces, families, kids and the whole community. It will lighten up the atmosphere.
>
> <div align="right">Indigenous youth mentor and musician, Lajamanu 2008.</div>

Through detailed ethnographic research a picture is being constructed of what is going on in learning environments that commonly incorporate the arts: music, theatre and multimedia or digital technologies. Our research indicates that young people are engaging in projects and programs where they have control over the space, time and resources to acquire and practice relevant, new skills—where they have the freedom to explore and express their contemporary Indigenous identity. In the case studies we are beginning to see the convergence of the following aspects:

- The projects often draw on Aboriginal language and culture, and link closely with local community interests and needs.

- The projects allow access to resources and control over the space to allow productive processes to take place (see Fig. 1.).

Fig. 1. Learning processes and outcomes.
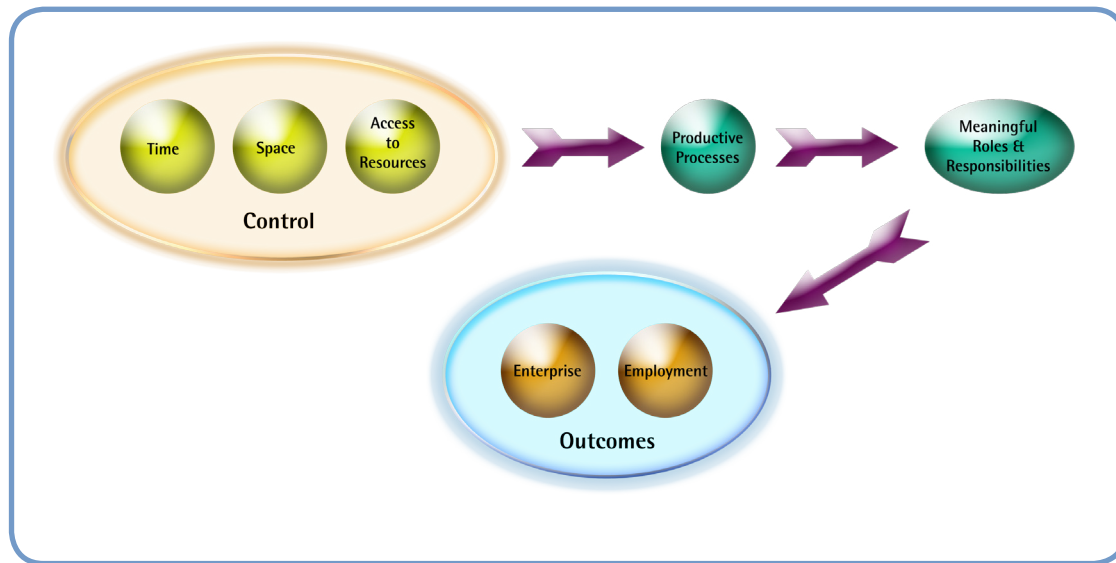
- The projects allow participants to experience what it is to be self-motivated and to self-regulate the process and self-evaluate the product.

- Young people are participating in non-directed learning, practising that learning and using new knowledge to independently produce meaningful cultural artefacts (songs, CDs, films, database content).

- Young people are becoming knowledge producers in the context of new and transformed processes.

- Independent access to resources allows for the generation of unique multimodal texts particular to each locale.

- The existence of a vibrant learning environment often multiplies opportunities for engagement across and beyond the local community and sometimes nurtures the development of new enterprises.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

The aim of this project has not been to find a replicable model or method but to look at the factors that create the contexts that work. Drawing on the case study data, the project team aims to promote approaches that successfully re-engage young adults with learning and literacy acquisition and development outside of school and throughout the lifespan. The project outcomes have included scholarly papers, conference presentations, and DVDs produced by youth researchers. By mid-2010 the project team will have drafted a Lifespan Learning and Literacy Handbook and DVD that will provide suggestions, possible interventions, and resources for program development for distribution to Indigenous communities, policy-makers and various levels of government across the country.

THE CHALLENGES

If young people are to become competent, mature adults able to shape their own futures and contribute to the economic futures and social cohesion of their communities, it is essential that diverse ways are found to support their ongoing learning. Achieving this will entail paying attention not only to institutional schooling and post-school training, but also to learning environments outside formal instructional settings. Findings from this research suggest the need to support learning pathways that encourage language and multimodal literacy development, positive identity formation and economic enterprise by sustaining the local and creating links with the global.

The key challenges emerging from this research include:

- Expanding the potential for youth learning in remote contexts beyond traditional institutional parameters.

- Legitimising alternative approaches to learning and securing ongoing funding for such approaches.

- Revisualising remote Indigenous futures as localised, socially cohesive and inclusive of new enterprises of a hybrid nature, combining customary activities with market opportunities.

- Reframing the negative portrayal of Indigenous youth in public debate and the media.

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