

YOUTH LEARNING SYMPOSIUM

Darwin
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PHOTO CREDIT: SHANE WHITE AND ANGELA HARRISON.

About the Lifespan Learning Project

The 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 isn't 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.

Project Findings

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.

Through detailed ethnographic research a picture is being constructed of what is going on in learning environments that commonly

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1. An ARC Linkage Project jointly funded by the Australian Research Council, The Australian National University and The Fred Hollows Foundation.

Lifespan Learning Research Partners



Research for **Lifespan Learning and Literacy for Young Adults in Remote Indigenous Communities** 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.

www.djilpinarts.org.au/

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 hART 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.

www.ngapartji.org/

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.

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 has been responsible for radio, film, and music production, broadcasting and training and has promoted 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. Now musicians 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 aged 17-30 by providing a range of programs and a community service structure through which they can engage in meaningful and productive community activity.

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

www.mttheo.org/home.htm

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, the 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.

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

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 our 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.
- 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

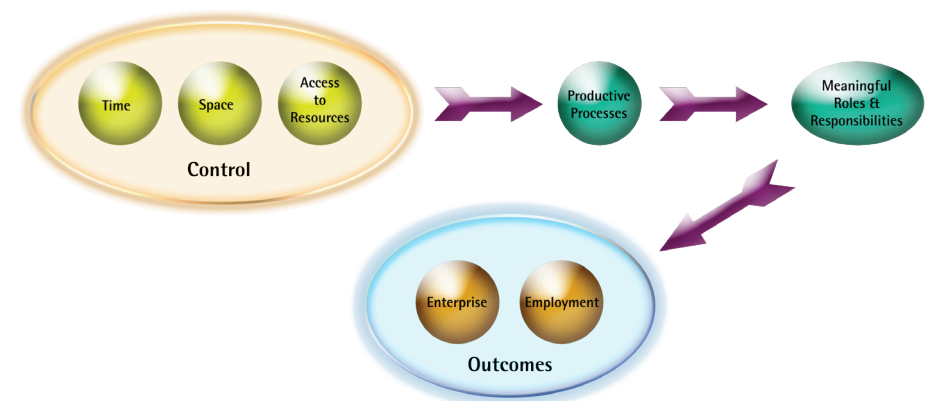
development outside of school and throughout the lifespan. The project outcomes have included scholarly papers, conference presentations, and DVDs produced by youth researchers. By mid-2010 the project team will have drafted a Lifespan Learning and Literacy Handbook and DVD that will provide suggestions, 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 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.



Researchers and Key Project Participants

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.

Acknowledgments

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