



Charles Darwin University

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ENGAGING WITH AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY AND THE YOLŊU OF NORTHEAST ARNHEMLAND

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Abstract

The Yolŋu Studies stream of tertiary teaching and academic research has a long history within the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge systems at Charles Darwin University. This case study tells the story of the gradual unfolding of the engagement between the university and Yolŋu (northeast Arnhemland Aboriginal) knowledge authorities and their practices. It begins with the long negotiations to set up the teaching program under the authority of senior Yolŋu advisers, to set up a curriculum and classroom practice which remains faithful to Yolŋu laws around knowledge exchange and representation. Alongside the Yolŋu laws, was a particular epistemology which we worked hard to validate and support within the academic classroom. The institutionalisation of Yolŋu knowledge practices in the academy allowed the academics and the Yolŋu advisers to develop collaboratively a transdisciplinary research methodology which attends to the requirements of both Yolŋu and academic knowledge traditions. The paper gives examples of successful research collaborations, and examines some of the philosophical work which needed to be done for successful respectful engagement.

Introduction

Other universities have schools of Indigenous Studies, but Charles Darwin University (CDU) distinguishes itself by having a School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems. From an international academic perspective, where the knowledge practices of science and the enlightenment are so thoroughly entrenched, it is a remarkable commitment on the part of our

university to embed and commit to engagement with alternative knowledge systems. This case study is a story of non-Indigenous academics and Aboriginal knowledge authorities slowly and tentatively learning to do knowledge work together productively and in good faith. The Indigenous knowledge practices in this case study are those of the Yolŋu Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhemland in the Northern Territory, Australia. Yolŋu have been sharing their knowledge and agreement making practices with foreigners for hundreds of years, so were well experienced in sharing knowledge carefully and respectfully when the missionaries arrived and established for themselves a long tradition of language-learning and negotiation.

The Yolŋu studies program started at the Northern Territory University (now CDU) at a time when regional universities were expanding, the university was keen to support Indigenous studies, (and had in fact founded a new Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies,) and the use of Indigenous languages in Northern Territory schools was still being supported and encouraged. The particular Yolŋu who have been key to the success of the Yolŋu relationship with CDU have all been highly respected members of their various clan groups and most have been associated in some way with the successful tradition of bilingual education. Some have spoken little English, and others have been fluent, bilingual and bicultural. A key figure until her recent death was Dr Marika who was instrumental in articulating Yolŋu philosophy for educationalists, and who co-wrote the first Yolŋu languages and culture courses taught at Northern Territory University (now CDU). Following her was Waymamba Gaykamangu, the CDU Yolŋu studies lecturer who worked with students, university authorities and researchers for over 12 years until her retirement. Currently the Yolŋu Studies lecturer is Yingiya Guyula a Liya-Dhalinymirr man. Accompanying them has been a legion of senior Yolŋu knowledge authorities, (some of whose details can be found on the Yolŋu consultants' website www.cdu.edu.au/yaci). Three non-Yolŋu who have worked on the academic side of the engagement have had long experience speaking Yolŋu languages and working collaboratively with Yolŋu (John Greateorex and I since the 1970s), and doing philosophical work collaboratively with Yolŋu (Helen Verran since the 1980s). We have all been 'adopted' into different clan groups as is the traditional practice.

This is a story of a long, slow and careful collaborative process, starting with a well-supervised Aboriginal language teaching program, which grew slowly into a research capability which eventually allowed for some careful work articulating the nature of engagement between these diverse knowledge traditions.

An Aboriginal/Academic teaching program: Yolŋu studies

I was invited to set up an Aboriginal languages program for the new Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at the (then) Northern Territory University, after twenty years working in Yolŋu languages and culture in Northeast Arnhemland. The university's original idea was to choose a widely spoken Aboriginal language, and set up a stream of units for a major in the new Bachelor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies degree.

I was paid to work for a year to negotiate the setting up of the program, an investment that is almost unthinkable in today's university climate. Although my skills were in Yolŋu languages, I began by talking at length with the Larrakia traditional owners of what is now the Darwin area, where the main university campus is situated, to see whether they wanted support and assistance for their own language work, whether they would want a Larrakia program set up at NTU, and whether they were happy for a 'foreign' Australian language to be taught on their land. After discussion over some months, with the blessing of some senior Larrakia and the support of the university, we agreed to investigate the development of a Yolŋu language program. I was funded to travel to the three biggest Yolŋu communities (the three ex-missions of Milingimbi, Galiwin'ku and Yirrkala) to look for advice and support.

From the university's point of view, a Gupapuyŋu language program would fit in nicely with the linguistics teaching and research program at the university. Gupapuyŋu had been chosen by early missionaries to be the language for the church and school, so there was an established literacy tradition. Gupapuyŋu had been later chosen by the Department of Education to be the language of instruction in the Milingimbi school bilingual program. By the time I arrived at NTU, I had spent well over ten years making books, newspapers and dictionaries in Gupapuyŋu and other languages, and there were hundreds of good texts and language notes available to support the program. Gupapuyŋu seemed to be the natural choice for enlistment to the academic world, but I was also conscious of the fact that many Yolŋu from other language groups felt that their own languages and stories had been marginalised by the Gupapuyŋu ascendancy.

So I was not surprised, as I travelled through the Yolŋu communities on behalf of the university, visiting my old friends and 'adopted' relations, that the people with whom I sat down to talk, all said unequivocally that *all* Yolŋu languages, not just one, would need to be taught. They also made it clear that not just the language, but the *culture* as well needed to be taught. The culture, from their point of view, starts with the links between people, languages and lands (each person has her language, each language has its territory, each territory has its people and species...). Just as importantly, 'culture' entails the links between those various land-language-people combinations, as they relate together as mother and child, or as sisters, grandmothers and so on. These kin links bring with them complex responsibilities and a politics of representation.

If you want to hear the story of *this* place, or *this* totem, or *this* ancestral connection or event, you need to talk to the right person, the owner (or the ‘manager’), the person with the right to make those particular representations.

I should not have been surprised by this demand. I had already been carefully inducted into the Yolŋu theory and practice of knowledge production in my previous position at Yirrkala Community Education Centre (CEC). This requirement emerged from an ancient pedagogical theory, fundamentally counter to the prevailing transmission model dominating Western classrooms in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal schools throughout Australia. (see Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie 1995, Christie 2006c). Emboldened by the strength of their numbers after years of intense formal training for Yolŋu teachers, the Yirrkala School Council and Action Group at the CEC had begun to agitate for a recognition and implementation of Yolŋu pedagogy in their schools. Using various metaphors from everyday Yolŋu life, community elders worked with the school Action Group and with Helen Verran, their consultant philosopher, to help Yolŋu articulate, and Balanda (non Indigenous people) understand, what a true Yolŋu education might entail. One popular Yolŋu metaphor which emerged from these collaborations was *garma*. Speaking of the space and practice of particular public ceremonials in the Yolŋu world (Marika-Mununggiritj, 1990), the *garma* metaphor elaborates the basis of a particular sort of public knowledge work. People come together in a specially identified neutral place, working collaboratively to produce for public edification and approval, a complex performance combining contributions originating from a variety of independent but connected people-place assemblages or Yolŋu ideocalities (Tamisari, 2002). Anyone of good faith is welcome to contribute to the *Garma*, including potentially, academics, bureaucrats, school teachers, or any other outside representatives, so long as they follow the rules.

I was rather daunted by the demands to reproduce a *garma* in the academic classroom, it seemed an impossible task to set up a program where students learn all Yolŋu languages, learn them only from their owners, and learn the attendant culture as well, following Yolŋu rules for knowledge production. I enlisted eight Yolŋu community elders to supervise the program development and implementation. The advisers helped me work with the university to select a Yolŋu lecturer – Waymamba Gaykamaŋu – and to write up the course outlines and resources. The advisers’ group is still active, and increasingly involved in consultancy work, although there have been several deaths and replacements over the years, and Waymamba has only recently retired after fourteen years of continuous service.

Setting up the program turned out to be not too difficult. The Yolŋu advisers were keen to have their languages taught at the university, and had a clear vision of the stages through which a

neophyte should pass: the experience of students in the classroom should recapitulate the experience of young Yolŋu children as they grow into Yolŋu life. Their lecturer was Gupapuyŋu so it was appropriate for them to start learning Gupapuyŋu, (all Yolŋu children begin their lives by learning a language other than their own – their mother’s) and this is what the Yolŋu Studies students do for their first semester of study. By the time they learn their first suffix – suffixes are the way Yolŋu grammar makes connections in the world – the students are already adopted into the Yolŋu kinship network. Yolŋu have been adopting newcomers into their kinship system since long before the first Europeans arrived. It is both a sign of welcoming generosity and a way of keeping strangers under control and ensuring they have a part to play and contributions to make. For most Yolŋu Studies students, the first few weeks of class are as exciting as they are confusing, like the first few years of a child’s life. As you get to know the people in your social network, you also get to know how they relate to you – as mother, grandmother, sister, nephew etc – and how you should treat them – whom cordially, whom respectfully, whom with complete avoidance, whom you can pressure for assistance, whose interests you need to serve.

The first ‘grammar’ the Yolŋu studies student struggles with, are those which connect them to their kin, and at the same time to their land and ancestral lore. My job as coordinator was to be very active behind the scenes making sure the students understood what was expected of them, as students in a Yolŋu context, as well as to help them understand the complexities of their suffixes, pronouns, verb classes, transitivity etc. We avoided linguistic and anthropological representations as much as possible and centred the teaching in the storytelling and conversations of the Yolŋu lecturer. Students grow into an understanding of the language and culture first through their relationship with their lecturer and with each other. Their first assessment item is to translate into English a Gupapuyŋu short story about their lecturer’s daughter, and grandson which uses all the correct kinship terms and suffixes. For their second assignment they write a story about their own kin in their own world – wherever they come from - using Gupapuyŋu kin terms, pronouns and suffixes. As they ‘grow up’ over six semesters of study, the students start to hear and read stories of other people, places, ceremonial objects and practices told by different people in the languages to which they belong.

Slowly but firmly and often without me being fully cognisant of their goals or reasons, the advisers and the Yolŋu lecturer massaged the course outlines and assessments to conform to Yolŋu protocols for knowledge work. We had the occasional difficulty with the university – I had to fight to prevent the first Yolŋu Studies unit from becoming a ‘core’ unit in the undergraduate degree on the grounds that respect is the basic condition for effective Yolŋu learning, and that could not be guaranteed for students who were required to study Yolŋu

languages compulsorily. But most of the time it was an easy process full of good will, laughter and hard work. Students are able to fulfil academic requirements while being immersed within a knowledge community in which stories belong to people, you need permission to explore particular ideas, words must be used carefully because they make new worlds possible, and there is much that must not be asked or revealed. These arrangements, developed in the mid 1990s, set the foundations for an ongoing process of the negotiation over knowledge in research and consultations which remains recognisable and faithful to both academic and Yolŋu knowledge traditions.

An Aboriginal/Academic Research practice: The Yolŋu Consultancy Initiative.

As the Yolŋu knowledge authorities slowly gained recognition for their contribution to academic work, they found themselves in a position to mobilise their knowledge resources in a wide range of collaborative activities. Teaching, researching, consultancy and community engagement became mutually constitutive (Christie, 2008). However the engagement of senior Yolŋu as professional researchers was not without its difficulties. Assumptions of the deficiency of Indigenous knowledge are deeply embedded at all levels of contemporary Australian society including the academy. We started slowly.

Our first projects were supported through the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRC-AH). The first of these was a study of communication breakdown between Aboriginal patients and non-Aboriginal health professionals in a local renal centre. The Aboriginal researchers insisted upon an agreement-making model of communication as building shared understandings within clinical contexts. The project was called '*Sharing the True Stories*' (Cass et al, 2002). The Yolŋu researchers mobilised the garma notion that the biomedical model and its practices are one particular way of 'doing' the body, sickness, treatment and health that needs to be engaged in the context of alternative models and practices. Yolŋu arrive at the renal centre with their own stories, their own knowledge of their bodies, their own theories of the 'good' of treatment (Mol, 2003). Effective communication is not so much a matter of passing a message on diagnosis and treatment from doctor to patient, but of both sides working together to build a situated agreement and a way forward. Thus the introduction of an alternative (indigenous) model of communication made for a clean break from the established literature on communication in medical contexts which depended upon the conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979).

The second project, called the '*Longgrassers research*' (Maypilama, 2004), was an attempt by Yolŋu researchers to use a Yolŋu methodology to research the lives and ways forward for their Yolŋu relations living under the stars in the long grass along the Darwin beaches and in

parks and vacant land. In this early example of indigenous research, we saw a refusal of the disjunction between the research work, the ‘findings’ and the ‘recommendations’. What was found and recommended was that which has always been going on. The research functioned not to discover new ways of supporting Yolŋu in the long grass, but new ways of validating and making visible to the research world, the ongoing and ancient work of caring for kin.

We then received some money from the Australian Research Council (ARC) to conduct research into the emerging uses of digital technologies in the intergenerational transmission of traditional Aboriginal ecological knowledge. This research, which we referred to as *Making Collective Memory with Computers* exposed, explained and helped resolve issues around the insistence of the archive in contemporary institutional Indigenous knowledge work (Verran, 2005), the accompanying resistance of Yolŋu knowledge authorities to centralized formal repositories, and a critique of Western ontologies hidden within conventional software, such as ethnobotanical databases which are being implemented in Indigenous contexts around the world (Christie, 2008a; Christie, 2006a; Verran, 2006; Verran, 2007).

The success of these three projects allowed for the emergence of a more formalised team of Yolŋu researchers under the auspices of CDU’s School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the School of Education. This team, through the loosely constituted Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative, has collaborated over a wide range of significant intercultural research – including technical, social, medical, ecological, and educational –and at the same time continued to explore some of the significant philosophical issues which this work demands.

Philosophical work around the engagement of academic and Yolŋu knowledge.

Our collaborative transdisciplinary (Christie, 2006) research work is occasionally difficult for two reasons: first, the received metaphysics which underlies most academic research is so entrenched, and so reluctant and awkward in its reflexivity, that academic knowledge work has great difficulty unthinking or stepping back from, or even thinking *about* its Western European assumptions. Thus second, the deficit model of Aboriginal knowledge is equally entrenched, its critique of other knowledge practices is seldom seriously recognised. Western scientists know, for example, that Aboriginal fire ecology produces better results for sustaining biodiversity than do Western practices, yet the two practitioners find it very difficult to talk to each other (Verran, 2002).

Perhaps the most troublesome obstacle to overcome in the *Sharing the True Stories* (Cass et al, 2002) project was the health professionals’ unshaking conviction of the objective reality of

the biomedical body. The insistence of the stories of the Yolŋu renal patients presented to the academic researchers an ontological problem which generally goes unrecognised – at least until different claims of significance come to the table and refuse to go away. The biomedical notion of truth as lying out-there in a pre-existing discoverable machine-like body is in contrast to a Yolŋu notion of truth as something residing and regenerating through attention to ancestral reality (one could call it the dreaming) and manifesting itself in varied and multiple ways (Mol 2003) in here-and-now secular contexts. Truth in this sense, as in the *garma*, has a physical embodiment. There is no *a priori* split between the social and the natural, between language and reality, spirit and body, or theory and practice. Thus in the *Making Collective Memory with Computers* project, ‘we came to see how Aboriginal Australians struggled against the grain of digital technologies designed as tools for representation, turning them to use in knowledge practices where each instance of re-presentation is a unique performance choreographed for a particular momentary situated purpose’ (Verran, 2007).

Thus the model of knowledge that holds in Yolŋu Australia is in many respects very different from that embraced by science and Western traditions more generally. We had a chance to examine these differences when the Yolŋu researchers were invited to elaborate Yolŋu understandings of *gifted and talented* children for the National Centre for Science, Information Technology and Maths Education in Rural and Remote Australia (see www.cdu.edu.au/g&t). Whereas in Western models, knowers are born as more or less clean slates, and are gradually filled with ordered knowing by virtue of experience, in the Yolŋu world, knowers are born full—filled with everything they will need for effective participation in adult life. But they must be treated properly for their talents to take good effect. Learning here is the mobilisation of an ordered flowing of that ancestral experience already and always filling the knower. Experience of the right sort is crucial here if knowers are to reach their full potential. Places, families and events are the motive forces. *Gifted and talented* children are born gifted and talented, their gifts are coextensive with the land and what it provides, their talents are their minds and bodies, connecting each to his or her ancestral places, kin, totems and connections. These are the same knowers who in the *Sharing the True Stories* project, came to the renal unit full of knowledge of their bodies, their symptoms, and their meanings, ready and able to build shared understandings and strategies with health professionals consistent with their Yolŋu destinies.

The *Longgrassers* research was already well underway by the time John and I were called in to help to develop a report for the CRC-AH. It was a good thing that it was already well under way: I wasn’t given a chance to infect the methodology. As it turned out our pleasant job was to talk carefully with the two researchers, and help them formalise a report, including some

recommendations. We encountered a problem helping the Yolŋu researchers write up the methodology: the Yolŋu researchers couldn't see, and didn't want to pretend, that their research methodology was anything other than the right, decent, everyday, ongoing way to behave. The methodology was not a way to discover an answer to an intractable question, but rather a way of acting together in good faith, visibly and well, and with proper support and recognition on this, and any number of other issues of current concern. There was no real distinction between the method and the outcomes. The report itself was seen as a presentation rather than a representation. The *Longgrassers* project was initiated by Yolŋu as part of their ongoing everyday work with their relations living in the long grass.

More recently, the work of the Yolŋu consultants each time has been commissioned from outside. The negotiation of a Yolŋu research methodology for projects with external funding can prove tricky. We generally have work to do delineating a workable model of the knower or of the known (or both) and sometimes the funding body may see that work as a waste of time, or money or power. How *do* we understand the child who is (or isn't) gifted and talented? How *do* we reach agreement over how to build shared understandings on the floor of the renal unit? How do we understand the life of numbers in a Yolŋu community? (see www.cdu.edu.au/macp). The Yolŋu consultants spend a good deal of time considering their method, which to them, while complex and painstaking, is a respectful, and obvious process, understood in many ways, including through the metaphor of those ceremonial practices which fall under the class of *garma*.

The methodology begins with a close examination of the questions to be addressed, in the context of who wants to know and why. What *do* we/they mean by 'gambling'? What *do* they mean by 'harm'? Who in fact do they mean by 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal' or 'gambler' or 'at risk' or 'responsible'? We take care to treat these questions seriously as metaphysical questions. Yolŋu are experienced in building agreement while taking difference seriously. They use the 'language of indeterminacy' (Povinelli, 1993), not because they are uncertain or at risk, but because agreeing over words is agreeing over worlds. It is work to be done carefully. Much is at stake. We need to get it right. Of course we do not try to persuade the funding bodies that they are paying for an exercise in metaphysics – they *know* what they are talking about. But we are sure to offer them through the process, some new, interesting and profitable ways for them to think about what can be done. We take pleasure in working to find and talk about buried assumptions wherever we find them, and redo them in productive ways which remain faithful and useful to both the Yolŋu and Western ways of thinking and doing.

Always, but usually in the background, there hovers the question of truth. How do we make honest, accountable and viable claims for our truth? The academic tradition comes with its sealed package of epistemic criteria based upon reason. But Yolŋu often judge truthfulness in research through other criteria to do, with example of agreement in good faith. When we worked on the evaluation of the *Financial Literacy* project the consultants came up with two interesting ideas which the funding body took on board: One was that what looked like poor financial literacy was often a matter of the Yolŋu ethic of sharing everything you have, including money, rather than saving it up. The other was that what looked like poor financial literacy was often a matter of the Credit Union not providing easily accessible information about account status, for example, at the right time, and in a suitable manner for Yolŋu to do their money business in their own ways, in their own places, in their own time, for their own purposes.

In a feedback session to the consultancy funding body, some of the credit union staff quite appropriately defended current practices on a number of grounds. At this, the chief Yolŋu consultant for one of the communities became concerned. He wasn't worried that the credit union was reluctant to commit fully to implementing all the recommendations. He was worried that they were acting a little defensively. The good faith between the consultants and the credit union was being strained, and this would strain the good faith between him and his community, and between the community and the credit union. He was committed to taking back to his community news of the outcome of the consultation and of the good will and commitment of the Credit Union to respond to the recommendations (not necessarily to implement them). To him, the fundamental criterion for the success of the project – its truth - was the building and preservation of good faith between all the negotiating parties (truth in the sense of its faithfulness, not its representational accuracy). Yolŋu philosophers are experienced working with epistemic criteria other than abstract reason, and working through these in the context of university research is an exciting part of the engagement process.

Turning finally to the lessons we have learnt and which may be useful to other people in other contexts wanting to develop similar collaborative arrangements, the first lesson is that all contexts are unique. Principles and practices which work in one context may not be transferrable to another. A key lesson is to work slowly and allow new ideas and practices to emerge here and how, and grow slowly through mutual respect and a history of shared experience. These will always be different in each new place. We succeeded largely because the Balanda in the program were fluent speakers of Yolŋu languages the Yolŋu were good speakers of English, and we placed Yolŋu principles, practices and concepts at the centre of our work – methodologically and analytically. We slowly came to a position where we were able to pay people well and properly

for their contributions, and we refused to take on any work which wasn't properly negotiated within both the academic and the Yolŋu frameworks for ethics. In the unreflexive and intractable world of western academic knowledge we found that some difficult philosophical work could be done by paying close attention to methodology (who speaks when, who gets input into framing the question, how do we agree upon people's authority to speak etc). Our experiences may not provide many take-home messages for others in similar contexts beyond those they know themselves. They may however strengthen the resolve to work on research truth and method as both fundamentally local.

Conclusion

We are very fortunate that we have at Charles Darwin University the space, the structures and the resources to engage respectfully and profitably with Indigenous knowledge systems. Here the amazing resilience and creativity of Aboriginal knowledge traditions have been explicitly mobilised in addressing issues of fundamental concern, not only to academics, but more importantly to government and nongovernment organizations who genuinely want to engage with Aboriginal people in new ways and on terms negotiated in good faith.

This work has relevance not only in the local arena, but on the world stage, where the strongly centralised model of knowledge production with the state seen as the major site of knowledge production gradually gives way to a radical localisation and privatisation of knowledge resources - an issue to which Yolŋu knowledge traditions have long attended, and from which academic knowledge traditions have much to learn.

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