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Charles Darwin University

## Reflecting on STS in Action

### Micro-credentialing as collaborative epistemo-political work

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**Reflecting on STS in Action:  
Micro-credentialing as collaborative epistemo-political work**  
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**SLIDE 1: Introduction**

Hello, I'm Michaela Spencer, from the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University in Australia.

*First, I'd like to acknowledge the Larrakia people on whose land I am at present, as well as the Yolngu people on whose land much of this work was carried out. It's a privilege to be able to work on these lands every day, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.*



In this paper I tell stories of collaborative design work – talking about some rather odd objects called Indigenous researcher micro-credentials. They work amidst different epistemic traditions – modern and Yolngu Aboriginal Australian – and are involved in various market relations.

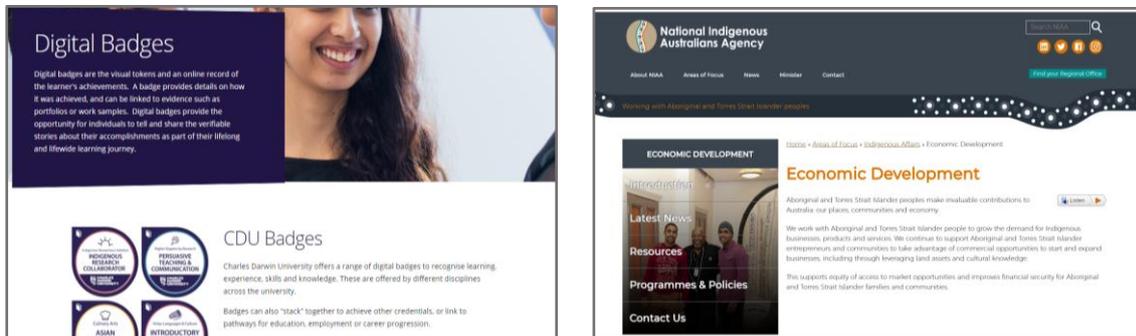
Work on these credentials emerged as part of my work with the Ground Up research team at CDU. Our research activities involve working collaboratively with Indigenous researchers and authorities on-country as part of various research products.

I have to confess to feeling rather allergic to these objects when the idea first emerged to acknowledge Indigenous co-researchers and collaborators through these university-based qualifications. I'm not entirely sure the allergy has subsided, but I am starting to see the work of creating these credentials as doing some interesting things.

The design of these micro-credentials has involved moving between the uni (where I am now), and Elcho Island, in Arnhem Land (that you can see in the image). And this oscillation is significant. But first, let me introduce you to some of the broader configurations that these credentials can be seen as participating.

## SLIDE 2: University / Northern Australian Economies

An entry into considering these odd-objects of Indigenous researcher micro-credentials is to talk about their involvement in two separate and interrelated discourses.



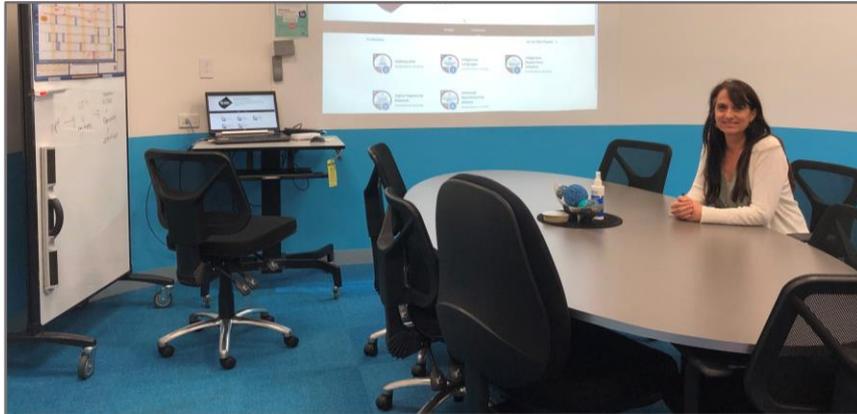
One of these is associated with a drive by universities to develop novel educational services products. As is happening in many places, the university where I work is looking for ways to increase student enrolment, including through new forms of credentialization and qualification. They are looking for ways to support of lifelong learning and contemporary career trajectories where continual re-qualification will be a norm. This also includes a particular focus on developing new educational pathways supporting Indigenous learners.

Another of these discourses is oriented around economisation and entrepreneurial economies being promoted within Aboriginal communities in northern Australia. An emphasis on development through business and entrepreneurialism is the focus of neoliberal governance, and policy arrangements that see community development as best served through enabling 'equity of access to market opportunities' – including through forms of qualification that support business development and entry into casualised workforces and sharing economies.

Within STS and other literatures, there is significant critique of these forms of economy and the socio-technical infrastructures through which they extend. It's also easy to see a confluence between growing technicity and economisation of governance, and the design of educational services products specifically suited for such environments. In the collaborative design of micro-credentials, there is perhaps some worthwhile concern to be raised, around operating within and upholding the growth and extension of such infrastructures. However, while acknowledging these normative discourses, and their dominance, I also want to explore the possibilities that arise in collaborative on-ground work, paying attention to disconcertments that arise.

Here, I set my inquiry down amidst the mundane practices of community research services design, and identify particular 'turning points' in the emerging life of these credentials. It's been in responding to and thinking through these interruptions as important elements of design, that I've also needed to grapple with ways of understanding these microcredentials as embedding working multiplicities, and generating performative effects which may exceed the dominant arrangements of these mainstream infrastructures.

### SLIDE 3: Story 1 - Designing micro-credentials with the Innovative Media Production Studio



*A few of us from the GroundUp team headed across campus to the Innovative Media Production Studio (IMPS). We were to meet with the team that would be developing the university's first batch of micro-credentials, and brainstorm possibilities for new digital badges that could be offered within the university. The IMPS presenter sat at the front of the room and flicked through web pages projected up on a clean white studio wall, taking us through the elements of the digital platform where the badges would be hosted and the employment databases to which they were linked. She told us that the university had recently entered into a contract with the company running the micro-credential hosting platform, and had purchased a certain number of 'seats' – which represents the number of students able to register a profile on the platform, and earn micro-credentials for their achievements.*

*We started to throw a few ideas around about micro-credentials that could be developed. In our team of GroundUp researchers, we had been looking for better ways to recognise the researchers and consultants that we worked with on various projects in remote Aboriginal communities. While there were opportunities for Indigenous students and teaching staff to come into the university, this was not always easy to achieve, or what everyone wanted. We recognised that for years Indigenous researchers working in their home communities had been helping university-based staff sharing their knowledge and expertise, whilst then seeing those people return to their university to receive PhDs or complete publications and receive promotions, while Indigenous researchers and consultants in communities did not receive such recognition.*

*We came up with two possible badges. One was the **'Senior Indigenous community-based researcher'** credential. This particular badge would provide recognition of prior learning, and be awarded on receipt of evidence (probably in the form of an e-portfolio) showing past participation in research projects, as well as reports and publications completed. Awardees were likely to have both strong cultural authority and have long term experience working with the university and other organisations around a range of projects and issues.*

*The second was an **'Indigenous community-based researcher'** credential. This badge was intended for researchers who didn't necessarily have such a long clear track record, but who were looking for ways to be recognised, and remunerated, as skilled consultants and researchers working in their home communities. They would be offered the opportunity to learn research skills on the job as part of their research training, and supported to create a web profile to help make visible the work they were doing and qualified for, should they be interested in seeking further employment in a similar vein.*

*These were the two badge ideas we started with, and for which we began to develop templates and skills and assessment evidence criteria. Part of the work of bringing these badges to life was to develop the sets of connections and information flows that would allow each earner to be entered into a data management system, and also be legible to employment databases which could recommend available jobs on the basis of the skills associated with a particular credential. (Needless to say, this was of limited value to recipients working in Aboriginal communities with very different employment situations than other places in Australia, but still came as part of the package).*

Perhaps this glaring discrepancy should have come as a clue, but part of what we hadn't really started to get a handle on, as this mixed team of IMPS and Ground Up designers, was that the assumptions configured in this assemblage of the emerging micro-credentials, were purely within the **epistemic** horizons of the modern academy. What a 'knower' *is* was already assumed by everyone involved. Their ontological character was clear. They were a student/ award recipient able to evidence or attain certain sets of skills. (And if we dig a bit deeper,) receiving an accreditation from the university would also allow others to have confidence in those skills, as held by a worker or services provider, and able to be reliably demonstrated in the context of other research and employment situations.

The **political value** was also assumed. Authorisation, by the university would help recipients have greater agency in economies where the delivery of research services could be bought and sold. Or to reiterate the phrasing of the NT economic development strategy, the credentials provide greater 'equity of access to market opportunities'.

However, it soon became clear to us that that in establishing and administering the badges as a CDU qualification, was only half the work that needed to be done. Other necessary design work only slowly became clear.

#### **SLIDE 4: Story 2 - Designing badges with Yolngu researchers on Elcho Island**



*On a research trip to Elcho Island, we drive around from house to house, hopping in and out of the 4WD. The local team of researchers I'm working with are a cheery bunch – experienced senior woman sitting in the front seat, younger researchers in the back, and various children and pets wriggling in between. Project work always happens under the guidance of a senior researcher or Elder authority,*

*and the discussion that we have with the people we meet are always facilitated by a younger researcher, usually speaking in one of several local languages.*

*On this occasion we're involved in some housing research, and driving to meet with people in their homes. As we drive we chat about the new micro-credentials - the badges that CDU is starting to develop and which might be interesting and helpful for researchers in the community. As we talk more about how the badges might look, and how they could be earned by people in the team, I mention that there could be two different kinds – one for Senior researchers that recognises cultural authority and existing experience, and a badge for younger people who do a lot of the face-to-face facilitation of interviews and meetings and other aspects of the research process.*

*The idea of this second badge is welcomed by one of the researchers, who is quite actively trying to build himself a small business as a cross-cultural consultant in the community. This includes working with visitors needing assistance when arriving for research, or other government and service delivery work. But amidst this enthusiasm, we realise there is another young man in the car who would not meet the criteria for either of these badges. He is recently out of school, working in our group with other members of his family.*

*Later that day, sitting on the veranda of the senior woman's house, she insists that this young man, who is often very quiet as we go about our work, is an important part of the team. He is generally there carrying the iPad, and recording or taking photos of what we do. At the same time, he is also watching and learning, seeing how the more experienced people go about doing what they do. His role is crucial, she tells me; doing research work gives elder people an opportunity to provide role models to younger people, to show them the way so they can work together with Balanda organisations themselves in the future. If the young people are not watching the work, then an important teaching and learning opportunity is going to waste. At the same time, the authority of the elders is in part maintained through being witnessed by young people, and without this her own work as a senior researcher would be less significant. We realised we needed a third badge to capture this important research role, we would call this one 'Indigenous Research Collaborator'. Now it felt like we had a set.*

At first, the design work in the IMPS laboratory was able to proceed without its largely invisible assumptions coming to the fore. But confronted with other collaborators, the designs from that other modern university institution needed to be fixed.

What the researchers saw as needing to be credentialled were relationally configured knowers who did not arrive alone, but work as an intergenerational group able to contribute different roles and forms of expertise. This is a different epistemics to what was implicitly assumed. What a knower is here, is rather different.

There was also a different politics coming to the fore, where the value of the credentials was not (only) to provide access to new business and employment opportunity, but also to promote and support proper configurations of *authority* as expressed in the performance of properly configured researcher groups.

However, to actualise this more fully, a final step was required.

### SLIDE 5: Story 3 – Designing Authorising Arrangements



*Sometime later I was sitting in the shade with some senior ladies who had been involved for many years in the Yolŋu research organisation Yalu' Marngithinyaraw. They were talking about a meeting that had recently happened at the Yalu' office in Galiwin'ku where CDU credentials, and recognition from universities for community-based researchers, had been discussed.*

*They were confused and a little agitated about some conversations that had occurred, and were seemingly trying to work out what had happened. At the meeting, a senior man, not a researcher, had raised lots of questions about how the credentialisation of research expertise should work when being offered by a Western institution. It seemed he had been trying to make the point that: yes, it's great for Yolŋu to get recognised for their research achievements in the university. But then back here in the community, when these same people are with family, and hanging around at the shop, who knows what they have done? No one knows that they have that respect and recognition from the nonIndigenous world, and this would be a strange situation. He suggested that the researchers needed to be acknowledged at home, in the community, as well. And if they weren't recognised properly, then they couldn't do their research, because others wouldn't co-operate. So, in relation to the design of working micro-credentials, these objects needed to also embed the capacity for accrediting researchers in ways that make sense for Yolŋu – and had much more to do with someone's position in networks of kin relationship and authority than anything else.*

*We started to talk about ways of supporting recognition across both Yolŋu and Western academies. Amongst various discussions around this issue that subsequently arose, there was one solution that stood out and was what we adopted. The shift was to recognise that every badge awarded would require the authorisation of two signatories – a senior Indigenous authority, and a university College Dean. This way, any badge awarded would recognise researchers as qualified by the university, as well as qualified through a process recognised as legitimate by an Indigenous Elder. This senior authority would need to be related in the right way to the badge earner through gurrutu (kinship) and be satisfied they could carry out community-based research in a manner appropriate for Yolŋu. The act of adding this second signatory helped to respond to the issue that the old man had raised – it enabled the researcher's level of achievement to be witnessed and recognised by other Yolŋu in the place where the researcher lived and worked. And for those Yolŋu to know and trust that person – and themselves assess if they were indeed right for the job – and the collaborative research work they are involved in.*

We can think back now to the invisible authorising of the university, which I flagged, but we had not really noticed in the first story of design work. The man speaking, seemingly out of turn, in the meeting at the research hub, was drawing attention to the need for another authorising institution to be visible. There is also a politics here, of retaining visibility within Yolŋu collective life, of doing credibility as a collectively and relationally recognised achievement which authorises not just the researcher, but the viability of community research at all.

#### SLIDE 6: Reflecting on STS in action



Within the Indigenous economic development stories of the Australian government, these credentials are imagined as means by which Indigenous researchers may become visible within emerging community services economies, configuring this work as a form of emplaced economic development in which often marginalised and underprivileged people gain access to new opportunities for employment and earning.

Such economic opportunity is something that many Yolŋu, and other Aboriginal Australians, are keen to access. But to as we've gradually come to learn, focusing on this alone leaves invisible the epistemic and political assumptions embedded in the technologies and practices accompanying the enactment of these opportunities.

The process of collaboratively developing these credentials, have elicited means for making visible forms of qualification and recognition which exceed the modern academy, and which require different sets of social-material configurations if they are to 'work' within Indigenous practices of knowledge and authority. Beyond offering 'tokens or trinkets' (as one Yolŋu woman cautioned us against creating) these credentials need to connect with the relational enactments of people-place as lively political practices participating in the emergence of Yolŋu collective life.

Reflecting on the means by which these credentials have come to life, has me now reading these credentials as epistemo-political participants in emerging community services economies. Supporting economic involvement as a political (and maybe or maybe not, emancipatory) action, as well as co-constitutively interrupting and reshaping the character of services economies so as to make space for divergent practices of recognition, qualification and authorisation.

Or more succinctly, these credentials do enact and participate in dominant arrangements of neoliberal educational institutions and economy, but they are also beginning to enact the relations and authorities of Yolŋu academies and people-places.

Recently reflecting on her past work around land management and firing regimes when working with scientists and Indigenous land owners, Helen Verran talks about singular governance objects as also multiple (2015: 53). Objects which themselves can for a moment uphold an agreed consensus of and between disparate participating parties, but which also enact and embed a working dissensus.

Remaining true to the disconcertments and interruptions emerging within collaborative ethnographic design practices, I suggest these micro-credentials can be productively read as objects embedding and enacting multiplicity in the act of doing qualification.

Embedding such multiplicity means there is no easy way to stabilise/singularise the institutional apparatus through which qualification is awarded, because each recipient will need to negotiate appropriate Indigenous authorisation of particular credentials as an aspect of their awarding. But nonetheless the awarding of these badges is possible in particular instances.

As a working and interrelated **set of credentials**, they offer individual awards to people participating in collectively enacted research practices. In working multiplicity, they can connect to, and also partly disassemble, the modern figure of the self-regulating subject: entrepreneurial, adaptive and self-reliant; a figure that is often recognised as lying at the heart of neoliberal market economies.

As we continue to work with these credentials, there is a growing crowd of organisations who are keen to include or 'add-on' the awarding of such credentials to their work with Indigenous people on a variety of research and consultation projects – but this can never be done easily or without negotiation. Similarly, as I continue working with the senior ladies and other collaborators at Elcho Island, they are talking and exploring further what it means, as a Yolngu, to be able to be appropriately and collectively seen as able to have such recognition and qualification. So, the badges themselves are not done.

But working multiplicities sees continual slipping and sliding. There is a quiet pleasure that arises in understanding that the work of these objects is never done can hold well enough when at times certain assemblages of practice are agreed and enacted, but that they also provoke negotiation of ongoing epistemo-political work, and a continued re-doing, ongoing design-within-events of academies, economies and accreditation.