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Yolngu Studies:

A case study of Aboriginal community engagement

MICHAEL CHRISTIE

The forty or more different clan groups of Australian Aboriginal people who live on or near the coast and islands of north-east Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory, are collectively known as Yolngu. Yolngu law dictates that all marriages must be outside the clan group, a principle which has given rise to complex ceremonial and economic exchange relationships among quite separate groups. Consequently, Yolngu have a strong tradition of negotiation across cultural boundaries, while sharing carefully and respectfully with non-Yolngu was already an established practice before the Europeans arrived, as Yolngu worked for, and traded with Macassans who came annually to their shores from the north-west, from what is now known as Indonesia.

Yolngu have ancient and carefully articulated theories of knowledge, identity, land, exchange and communication, which have been offered to newcomers wishing to engage with Yolngu on

Yolngu land and terms. One such theory derives from the metaphor of 'garma', the open ceremonial ground where people are invited to gather together to perform their collective histories, their particular identities and allegiances, and an agreed statement of a way forward. The garma metaphor is particularly valuable for conceptualising bicultural (or 'both-ways') education, where Balanda (European) and Yolngu knowledge traditions come together, work together and agree together in the context of a particular place and a particular agenda, without compromise to either of the contributing traditions. The garma metaphor is also useful in understanding the interaction between teaching, research and community engagement in a university setting. Community engagement is generally defined in terms of two-way relationships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes. In the Yolngu epistemology, if things are done in a proper, respectful, orderly, well governed way, new knowledge and enhanced community capacity emerge from the garma performance.

Universities have always engaged with society but it has often been through one-way interaction at arms length. Research agendas have been set by scientists, and new solutions and information have travelled in one direction – from university to society (Gibbons 2005). The emphasis has now shifted. Community engagement is embedded in the mission of universities around the world and is generally defined in terms of two-way relationships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes. Community engagement is now seen as one of the three core activities of universities, alongside teaching and research (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee 2005), and our university, the Charles Darwin University (CDU), has recently developed its own definition.¹ Engagement in this context is not an add-on, not outreach, but a building of scholarship connectivity into the objectives of the community (Garlick 2005).

YOLNGU STUDIES AT CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

The Yolngu studies programme was developed at Charles Darwin University, a small regional university in the Northern Territory of Australia, whose mission statement explicitly avows a commitment to the community in which it has grown. CDU has a particular

¹ 'Community Engagement is key to all of CDU's activities, characterised by two-way relationships in which the university forms partnerships with its communities to yield mutually beneficial outcomes.' (See www.cdu.edu.au/communityandaccess/communityengagement/index.html)

commitment to the Indigenous people of northern Australia, who make up 40 percent of the Northern Territory population. CDU is a 'dual sector' university, delivering education and training at both the TAFE and the Higher Education levels.

The Yolngu studies programme started in the same year that the old Technical and Further Education Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Studies was awarded faculty status, becoming the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (FATSIS). Four Vice-Chancellors and ten years later, the Yolngu studies team won the 2005 Australian University Teachers of the year award. Four people received the Prime Minister's award, two Yolngu and two Balanda, two from the Dhuwa moiety of Yolngu social organisation and two from the Yirritja side, two females and two males – Waymamba, Marrnganyin, John and Michael. But present at the awards ceremony was also a group of Yolngu advisers from remote Arnhem Land communities upon whose supervision and support the teaching, research and community engagement depended. It was truly an intercultural collaboration and this article records the nature of that collaboration.

ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAMME IN CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

The story of engagement precedes the inauguration of FATSIS and in fact of CDU by many years. Waymamba, a Gupapuyngu woman of the Yirritja moiety, was the first Yolngu studies lecturer and still works at CDU. She was born and grew up at Milingimbi, and is the daughter of Djawa, the 'head man' at Milingimbi and a renowned peacemaker and cross-cultural negotiator. Marrnganyin, a Galpu woman of the Dhuwa moiety, grew up at Galiwin'ku, and became a well-known literacy worker and educator before moving to Darwin, needing ongoing treatment for renal disease. She has been active in research, as well as teaching and linguistic work.

John Greateorex has worked with Yolngu since the mid 1970s and is currently coordinator of Yolngu studies and deeply involved in community engagement, teaching and research projects. Michael Christie who has been working with Yolngu for nearly thirty-five years, set up and coordinated the Yolngu studies programme with

Waymamba's assistance and is now engaged in collaborative transdisciplinary research with Yolngu in a range of areas.²

John and Michael both arrived in Arnhem Land at a time when the Methodists had already established a relationship with the Yolngu people which insisted that both Yolngu and Balanda needed to take each other seriously. John went to Galiwin'ku and Michael to Milingimbi. The church handed over the mission schools to the government, but left behind in the schools a tradition of vernacular language use and respect for traditional culture and kinship which very soon flourished into successful bilingual education programmes. There was agreement that Yolngu needed to understand and engage with the Balanda culture, which impinged upon their traditional cultures, and Balanda needed to respectfully engage with the knowledge traditions and the governance structures of the Yolngu.

The community engagement aspects of the story thus began long before the instigation of the Yolngu studies programme. By the time we came to negotiate the delivery of a suite of Yolngu language and culture units for the new Bachelor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies degree, the Balanda and Yolngu communities already enjoyed a long history of engagement. Our task was to bring the existing collaborative arrangements onto a university context. We needed to develop a programme of teaching, research and community engagement which was acceptable and profitable to both the Yolngu and the academic communities. The university provided resources for a whole year of community consultations and course development. This was 1994. Michael travelled to all the major Yolngu communities, and after extensive negotiations, advisers were appointed from each of the five major communities: Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak and Yirrkala.

THE YOLNGU RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The Yolngu advisers agreed upon a set of protocols, and to the appointment of Waymamba to the position of lecturer. The protocols established that all, not just one, of their many Yolngu languages needed to be addressed. Waymamba is a Gupapuyngu woman, so the Gupapuyngu language was chosen as the first language for all

² For example, 'Making collective memory with computers', a three-year project coordinated through the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems at CDU. For more information, go to <http://www.cdu.edu.au/ik>.

students to learn. This was a convenient decision, because a vast Gupapuyngu written literature already existed, probably greater than for any other Australian language. The written literature had been developed mostly in the Milingimbi School Literature Production Centre over twenty years of bilingual education. About three hundred Gupapuyngu texts were collected, and over the ensuing years, hundreds of other texts in other Yolngu languages have been added, and many more produced by the programme.

By the end of the first semester, students had already been introduced to short and simple texts in some other languages, and advanced studies mostly involved working in a strange new language. Language cannot be taught without full integration of culture. The languages are needed to teach the culture. The culture is needed to teach the languages.

Kinship structures and practices, regimes of land ownership and custodianship, and ceremonial protocols and practices are common to all Yolngu groups (with subtle differences that need to be addressed), so fundamentals of Yolngu culture can be taught alongside the initial study of Gupapuyngu phonology, morphology and grammar. The important particularities of clan groups – the naming conventions, images and metaphors which distinguish them from others – must be learnt later on from the right authorities, when the students have begun to successfully master the techniques of respectful negotiation.

Study notes, a reference book, and later a multimedia CD were developed for student use. The sale of these resources to the public provided a major source of funding for community engagement work. In accordance with a Yolngu tradition, which predates the arrival of Europeans on Yolngu lands, all newcomers are welcomed to engage with the culture through ‘adoption’ into the kinships system. Everyone is related to everyone else in a quite specific way. When bloodlines cannot be found to trace kinship, a system of subsections or skin names allows relatedness to be constructed. Every student is assigned a skin name, and through that they begin to learn how to trace kinship with each other, with Waymamba, and with all Yolngu they meet. Complex rules over how to address particular kin, what can and cannot be said to various people, and what forms of language to use when talking to and about ‘avoidance relations’, are learnt slowly, and occasionally with difficulty and embarrassment.

Stories of land, and its ancestral histories should be studied in the particular languages of the owners. To make available the full range of languages and the histories and places the different dialects make real, a CD dictionary, a CD library, and later an online database were developed (see www.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies and click on 'Online Database'). All of this work required further funding and over the next few years a series of small grants from within the university and from without (Open Learning Australia, as well as the old Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development) were won. There are now about six hundred texts available electronically, in around fifteen Yolngu languages. Copies of all or at least as many books as we could find still available in literature centres (around two hundred books) were acquired for the CDU library.

Nothing of a secret/sacred nature could be addressed in the teaching programme, and students must be made aware of the protocols governing the access to and practices of secret/sacred law. Waymamba, Marrnganyin and guest lecturers make the complex protocols around the performance of knowledge clear and teach students what can be said about particular others, and what must be left for them to say for themselves and how the forms of language used encode the rights of particular individuals of particular ancestral stories, songs, images and performances. Students can read and watch videos about particular ceremonies and ancestral stories on the website, and the lecturers explain what needs to be understood about how they work.

The university must accept its reciprocal responsibility to provide good Balanda education to Yolngu people. As a reasonable exchange for the Yolngu commitment to help Balanda learn Yolngu languages and culture, the university needs to reciprocate with a commitment to deliver good Balanda education to Yolngu on communities. This is a clear demand for a planned and managed programme of community engagement. Some of the older people in the original discussion reiterated an old demand that people be taught 'secret English' (Christie and Perret 1996). This demand has underpinned a number of theoretical and applied collaborative research projects, some of which will be discussed below.

THE PROGRAMME START-UP

The original programme had a full sequence of units for an undergraduate and postgraduate programme with notes on

languages and culture, and audiotapes that had been prepared for university short courses by Michael and Raymattja Marika, one of the Yolngu advisers. The notes and audiotapes were based on notes that had slowly evolved from the collaborations of many Yolngu with many mission and government linguists and teacher-linguists over many years. Both a Yolngu and a Balanda lecturer (Waymamba and Michael) were appointed under the guidance of the Yolngu advisers, and both Yolngu and non-Yolngu students were enrolled.

The participation of Yolngu students has greatly enriched the range of texts made available to students and the public in many Yolngu languages (through the online database). The Yolngu students do not need to study Gupapuyngu if that is not their first language, but begin immediately on improving their own vernacular literacy skills and later on commence a negotiated research programme of their own design in their own language (or another language of totemic significance to them).

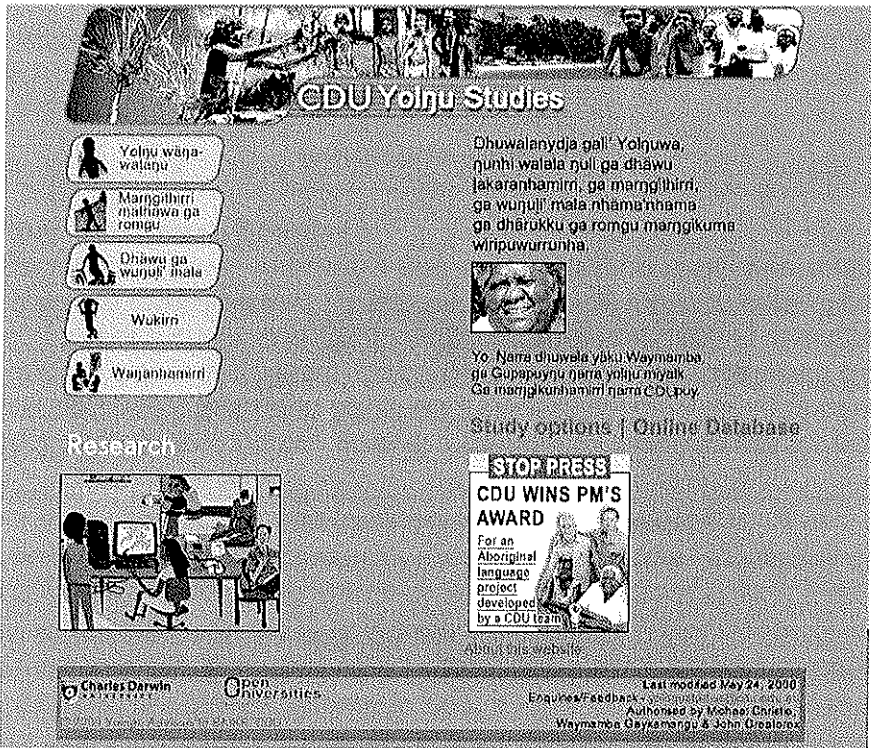
The two introductory level units familiarise students with the range of Yolngu languages, with pronunciation, spelling and kinship that is common in structure in all clan groups. As well, they are introduced to the fundamental principles of Yolngu life and with the grammar and morphology of Dhuwal and Dhuwala, two widely spoken language families. The intermediate level concentrates on a series of short texts on a variety of subjects in Yolngu languages, and on making conversation in Dhuwal.

Fortunately, the languages are morphologically very similar, and there are good resources available for most of them. Students work through the texts with their Yolngu lecturer, learning grammar, pronunciation, morphology, history, culture and interpretation. In the advanced units, students negotiate research projects with the lecturer, record, transcribe, translate and analyse texts, under Yolngu supervision. Many of these texts have originated from, and contribute to, collaborative research projects that are discussed below.

The Yolngu studies team also offers short courses to the general public. These tend to focus on the 'cross-cultural awareness' needs of teachers, medical workers, lawyers and government workers, but short course students are encouraged to convert their enrolments into a tertiary enrolment. The short courses are popular with the Balanda community of Darwin, and provide a source of revenue to pay for engagement work in the Yolngu communities in Arnhem Land.

INSCRIBING ENGAGEMENT IN THE WEB PRESENCE

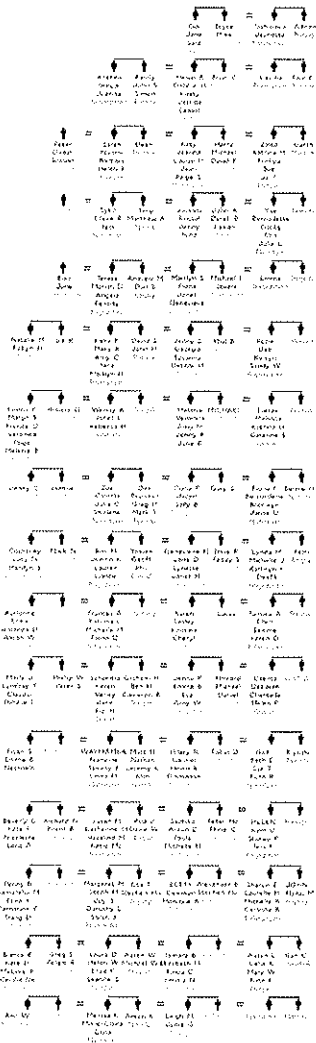
At the end of its second year, the programme won funding from Open Learning Australia to develop materials and an e-learning classroom for online students. The website has now been in operation for ten years. The following image shows the home page:



Home page of Yolngu Studies at CDU, 2006; www.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies.

The five buttons on the left describe firstly, the life and land of Yolngu people with an interactive map; secondly, the range of study options and enrolment processes; thirdly, resources such as fonts, a public database, books and CDs; fourthly, classroom access; and lastly, further information. The text of the opening screen is in Gupapuyngu, Waymamba's language. These change to English upon roll-over thus ensuring the focus remains on the Yolngu experience of language and culture. It needs to be approached and engaged before it can make sense to a non-speaker of Yolngu languages.

Further funding allowed us to develop a series of electronic and print resources, such as an electronic dictionary library, word list and grammar lessons, for classroom use, Yolngu use and for public sale. Profits from the sale of these resources have long been used to pay the advisers for the time they spend on their advisory work.



TEACHING ENGAGEMENT TO OUR STUDENTS

For many years, even before the arrival of the first Europeans, Yolngu had a custom of adopting visitors into their kinship system.³ This practice continued through the mission times, and remains today. If newcomers are adopted into the system, the practice offers an opportunity for Yolngu to welcome and care for them properly, as well as a chance for the adoptee to learn how to treat others with care and respect. Consistent with this practice, students are added to a class kinship network (see illustration, at left), which allows them to relate in particular ways to the lecturers, but also to each other. Skills learnt slowly in the first months of study are later consolidated during the conversation classes, and by the time collaborative research projects need to be negotiated, students have the skills to collaborate carefully and respectfully.

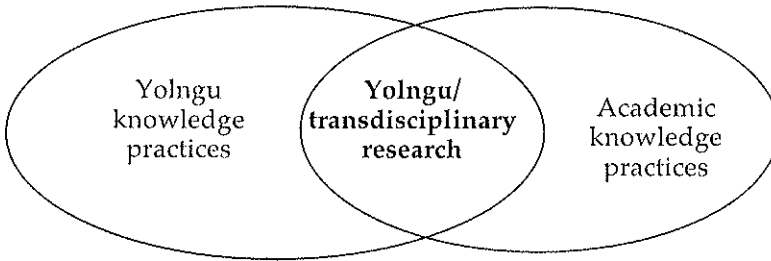
The diagram illustrates classroom kinship. Each new generation of students is added as the children and grandchildren of more advanced students. The equals sign indicates a 'marriage' relationship. Colours denote moieties, so patrilineal descent moves down the vertical lines. The kinship chart is reproduced here with permission.

³ See, for example, the Story of the *Last Macassan* by Djawa, Waymamba's father, in the online database. In this story, the last Macassan is eager to remind Djawa, who was a small boy when the incident took place at the beginning of the 20th century, of how he had been adopted as his elder brother by Djawa's parents in happier days.

ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH: WORKING DIVERGENT KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

The engagement of the Yolngu studies team in research was developed in the first few years of the programme. The collaborative research practice was informed by Yolngu practices and philosophies of knowledge production, particularly the philosophy of *garma*, as described earlier in this article.

The *garma* metaphor is characterised by its insistence upon the engagement of both Yolngu and Western academic protocols and practices of knowledge production as illustrated:



Yolngu/transdisciplinary research engagement is understood as the intersection between two knowledge traditions.

The sort of research which emerges from a properly negotiated engagement between Yolngu and Balanda knowledge systems includes that part of the Yolngu knowledge tradition which is recognisable or legible from a Western research perspective, and that part of the Western academic research tradition which is at the same time conceived, shaped, governed and understood within Yolngu knowledge traditions. The area in the middle of the diagram can be rigorously defined as Yolngu research because it fulfils the criteria for both Yolngu knowledge production and academic research.

The Yolngu criteria for a responsible, responsive collaborative research project include a careful negotiation of the research questions and Yolngu supervision of the scale and location of the research. Further, ongoing accountability not only in ethics, but in terms of accountability are important criteria, as is Yolngu governance of the research process including sudden changes of direction and delays, properly identified and defrayed transaction

costs, and Yolngu involvement in the production and assessment of truth claims (Christie 2006).

It is important to note that this research is accountable both within and outside the university. It is not interdisciplinary research, which responds to the demands of multiple disciplines within the academy; it is transdisciplinary, going beyond the evidential practices of the academic research (see also Tress et al. 2004). What is described below as 'Yolngu research' is a special (Yolngu) case of transdisciplinary research.

RESEARCH EXAMPLE ONE: ENGAGING YOLNGU COMMUNICATION THEORY

'Sharing the True Stories' was a four-year project investigating communication breakdown in the renal unit in Darwin (Cass et al. 2002; CRC Aboriginal Health 2003). Renal disease is epidemic in the Australian Aboriginal population, and good communication between health professionals and clients is central to good treatment. The researchers included Yolngu dialysis patients, educators, liaison officers and interpreters and Balanda nephrologists, nurses, managers, dieticians, social workers, linguists and academics.

The Yolngu researchers insisted on a traditional understanding of communication which reflected the garma philosophy and has much in common with Balanda theories of socio-constructivism. Communication is a matter of building shared understandings and working to bring narratives together towards agreement rather than transmitting truths from one mind to another; that is, collaboration rather than transmission. Each participant occupies an expert position (such as the patient to her symptoms and medical history, the nurse to the daily life of the renal unit and the nephrologist to biomedicine) and communication entails building shared understandings among the positions, in particular contexts.

The many outcomes of this long and complex project are recorded in a website which contains a range of communication resources (see, for example, www.cdu.edu.au/centres/stts/). In 2005 the project won the Business and Higher Education Round Table award for the best research involving a Cooperative Research Centre.

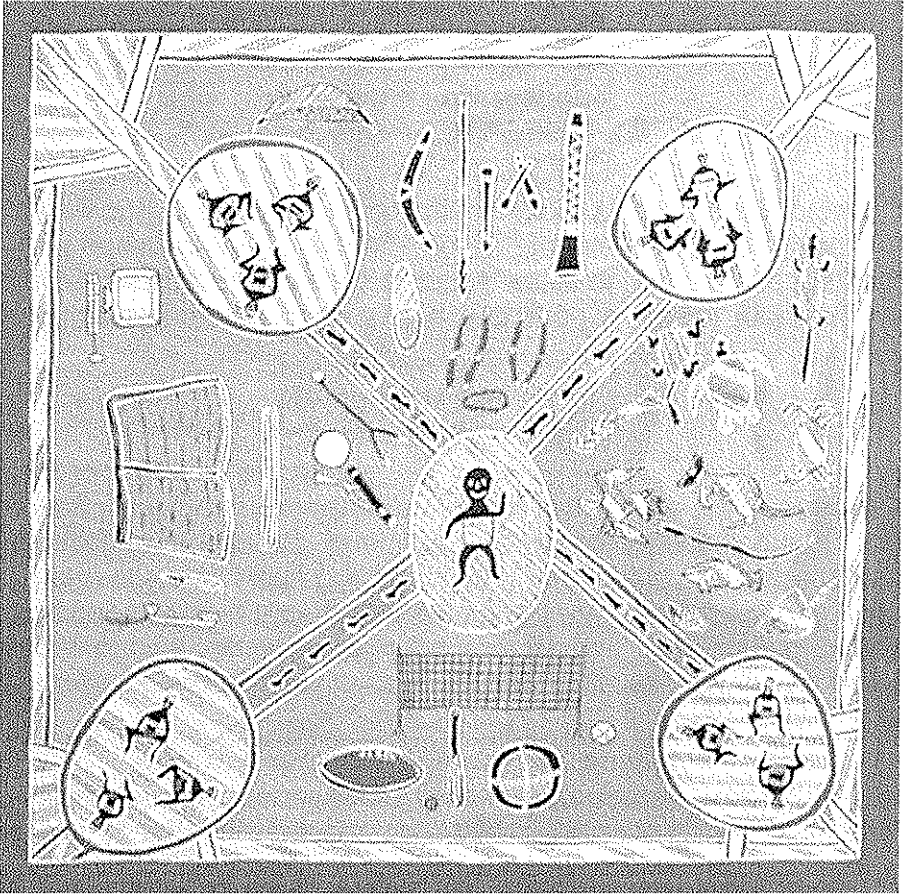
It is outside the scope of this article to detail all the findings of the project and the changes to the medical culture where it was set up. However, worth mentioning are the research outcomes which produced new sorts of engagement. The use of Yolngu languages,

language researchers and Yolngu studies students in collaboration with Yolngu researchers resulted in a broadening of the research focus away from purely linguistic concerns to an examination of the contexts (concerning spaces and agendas, for example) and the conditions (narrative, conversation, timing) under which good communication takes place. Much of the research transfer therefore involved working with the Balanda health professionals addressing issues of when and how to use an interpreter, ways of linking professional practice to the patients' agendas (rather than vice versa), and quite simple things such as providing more telephones for patients to do the work of discussing and building consensus about their treatment and its relation to their family lives with key kinfolk.

RESEARCH EXAMPLE TWO: ENGAGING YOLNGU METHODOLOGIES

The Yolngu studies team have had strong research connections with the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRC-AH), who helped to find funding for two Yolngu researchers, Lawurrpa and Garnggulkpuy, to set up the Yalu Marnggithinyaraw Nurturing Centre at Galiwin'ku (see <http://cdu.edu.au/>). The CRC-AH was very supportive of participatory action research involving Yolngu knowledge practices and the image on the following page shows a painting given to the CRC-AH by the Yalu centre which represents the nurturing of the Yolngu child through all its connections with various clan groups in the context of Balanda technology (computers, stethoscope), Balanda life (football), Yolngu culture (different food sources), and spirituality (sacred items).

Lawurrpa and Garnggulkpuy had been working in close collaboration with the Yolngu studies team as advanced students, researchers, mentors and supervisors for Balanda students who had received funding. Working in collaboration with the Yolngu studies team, they conducted 'first language' research to address the issues faced by Yolngu 'long-grassers' sleeping under the stars in the parks and beaches of Darwin. The original impetus of the research was the concern of Lawurrpa for her brothers living as 'long-grassers' and the research question emerged from issues relating to everyday life. The shared problem required the shared solution, it needed to be properly negotiated, and everyone who had a stake in the issue needed to be involved, particularly the 'long-grassers' themselves.



Nurturing the Yolngu Child by Steve Djati Yunupingu. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

A previous research project (Memmott & Fantin 2001) had failed to adequately include the 'long-grassers' themselves and equally importantly, the Larrakia traditional owners of Darwin, on whose land the 'long-grassers' were living. The report of Maypilama et al. (2004) presented some interesting findings such as the observation that many Yolngu living in the long-grass did so because they felt it provided them with better opportunities to live authentic Yolngu lives according to the imperatives of Yolngu law in the city of Darwin than on the 'mission' from which they felt they had escaped, and to which they were very reluctant to return. This was because many people from different clan groups living together in a large

community were not really in a position to support and respect traditional clan governance structures through their elders when they were undermined by the community council and its 'socks-up' Yolngu bureaucrats. Life in the long-grass of Darwin therefore compared favourably with homeland centre life as both were relatively free from the poisonous sorcery-ridden life on the 'mission'.

The 'long-grassers' research also exemplified the collapse of teaching, research and community engagement, which is conceptualised in the *garma* metaphor. For example, when it came to developing the final report, the Yolngu researchers made it clear that the sorts of practices which are normally implied by the 'findings' as 'ways forward' were already being implemented. There was no distinction between finding out what was wrong and doing something about it. Identifying a problem and solving it are, in the Yolngu 'research' process, integrated into a continuous programme of engagement (Christie 2006). The research represented an opportunity to collectively reflect upon what was happening in terms of both problems and solutions, to let people (Yolngu and non-Yolngu) know what was happening, and to gather support for the ongoing work of Yolngu looking after Yolngu in collaboration with government and the Aboriginal traditional owners of Darwin.

RESEARCH EXAMPLE THREE: COMMUNITY DIGITAL CAPACITY BUILDING

The original aim of this Australian Research Council Linkage project was to develop digital solutions (configurations of hardware, software and digital objects) that could be used by Indigenous people in their own places in natural and cultural resource management, including the intergenerational transmission of associated knowledge. In a number of different contexts Yolngu joined the research effort as co-researchers using video cameras, sound recorders, software and hardware for their own work (see, for example, <http://www.cdu.edu.au/ik/>).

The process was not one of developing databases and delivering them to Aboriginal organisations but rather one of engaging with people in their day to day knowledge work 'on country'. This involved taking a step back from the assumption that databases and archives contained and preserved Aboriginal knowledge, and instead looking at knowledge work manifest as everyday practice embedded in community life. Such work included making sense and value from

old photographs repatriated from southern museum collections; making videos of ceremonial performances to all senior ceremonial custodians to maintain their supervisory work when they could not make it to a particular ceremony in a different community; setting up systems so that Yolngu teachers in remote homelands can incorporate recordings of ancestral art, dance and song into their curriculum.

This research is once again deeply influenced by principles of community engagement, as solutions are negotiated in response to identified knowledge issues in particular contexts and the functions of digital technologies are not assumed but are reinvented and configured in a situated process of negotiation.

CONCLUSION

The success of the Yolngu studies programme depended fundamentally upon two things: firstly, that although it was often largely unnoticed or unrecognised, the community engagement strategy which underpinned the programme's instigation and ongoing development was massive. The engagement of the CDU staff with the wider Yolngu community in Darwin and in Arnhem Land preceded the programme by many years and has continued intensively since its inception. This has required many flights in light aircraft to dozens of Yolngu communities and homeland centres at the cost of many thousands of dollars. Funding for these was not obtained through an identified community engagement budget but through funds gleaned mostly from the offering of short courses, selling of CDs and books and small consultancies and research projects.

Without the established good will and the vast collection of resources in Yolngu languages available to the programme, the university would have had to make a massive investment. The Yolngu lecturers who live in Darwin are senior community members in their own right and spend a lot of time helping people in Arnhem Land keep in touch with family members who may be at a considerable distance away in Darwin, in hospital, housed in hostels or living in the long-grass. The faculty allows them the use of university telephones and gives them considerable time for doing community work as a key part of maintaining the reciprocal support for the programme on-the-ground in Arnhem Land.

Even with all the good will, hard work and considerable external funding, it still took the programme about ten years to become stable,

well supported, well documented and internationally recognised. Negotiations with the Yolngu advisers and communities are ongoing, and we continue to seek funding to enhance our community engagement in the context of teaching and research.⁴

The second critical success factor was the interwoven nature of the research, teaching and community engagement. The collaborative research projects actively contribute to the university's engagement with the community (not only the Yolngu community but also those in Darwin and the medical and digital community, for example) and produce material for the teaching programme. The teaching programme involves students in collaborative research under Yolngu supervision which increases research capacity in the Yolngu community and provides an ongoing source of funding for Yolngu supervisors. A good proportion of the Balanda students are professionals (lawyers, doctors, teachers) doing a postgraduate diploma in Yolngu studies and their research is very useful to their work. Further, through its ongoing work with the Yolngu advisers, the community engagement programme ensures the ongoing viability of the teaching programme and effective collaboration, supervision and transfer for the research programme.

In the garma context, research is collective knowledge production which necessitates practices of teaching and engagement. Teaching is a collaborative process which involves collective searching for ways forward for the whole community, and engagement involves elaborating new futures for community and helping the new generation participate in this. Thus a serious engagement with Yolngu intellectual traditions, particularly the garma metaphor, has allowed us to reconceptualise our work as succeeding through the erosion of the artificial boundaries between research, teaching and community engagement.

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