

Workplace Learning: Explicating Local Storylines

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Teachers at Kulai Aboriginal Preschool have developed big books for children based on stories told by the local Elders. The process followed was a validation of MacNaughton and Williams' (1999:54-56) call for early childhood educators to "reinforce children's self esteem and their pride in their cultural and racial identity ... focus on strengths, joys and richness of living with diversity ... us(ing) visual cues and gestures alongside words to ensure their descriptions are understood". The production process of the 'Dolphin Story', from its original telling by Auntie Marie (Somerville et al 1999), through a description of its dramatic performance during National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration [NAIDOC] and onto a photographic journey with the family who brought the story to life in a big book will be presented. This demonstrates some ways the teachers journeyed, as part of workplace learning, with culture in a preschool setting.

We acknowledge we are visitors to Aniwana country and thank Mrs Dianne Roberts for her welcome to this land. Over time we have all gained considerably from our Elders and we acknowledge their role in our learning. The last eighteen months at Kulai Aboriginal Preschool, Coffs Harbour has been spent adding to the skills base of the teachers and the supply of local cultural learning materials. The Preschool, of which Julie is the Director and Leanne second in charge, provides an educational program for 63 children. The staff at Kulai represent many nations from as far north as Cairns, south to Kempsey and west to Burren Junction. I, as teacher educator, was invited by the staff to accompany them on their staff development journey (Lederach 2000:47).

The 'Journeying with Culture at Kulai' project has benefited greatly from the willingness of the local Garby Elders to share their knowledges and stories. The development of staff skills and involvement of locally oriented cultural resources was funded by a grant from Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS]. This presentation aims to explain a workplace learning process where teacher educators from the University of New England [UNE], worked alongside the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal community. This process developed ways of meeting the challenges Kulai and its teachers are facing in their task of providing appropriate and useful education for Aboriginal children.

Workplace Learning

Cathryn McConaghy (2000:262) challenged Australian educators to rethink the way we were working when she stated:

The task of critical situational analysis within Indigenous education today is to determine significant differences in cultural practices, not in a way in which these practices enter the field as already read, but as an aspect of dynamically-constituted performance

Her view emphasises the living, developing, ever changing aspect of culture and how as teachers and teacher educators we might embed ourselves in it. Earlier McConaghy (1997) also identified that many people take the term 'Indigenous culture as a read'. This phrase seems to assume that all Indigenous cultures are the same and everyone knows the meaning of the jargon without thinking it through. Each individual has his/her own understanding of the meaning of culture. In this paper we plan to show how culture can be used as a medium for teacher education.

This narrative of events, highlights one incident that occurred during the 'Journey with Culture at Kulai' research project. This would appear to be immediately useful to teacher educators as an illustration of the importance of working with materials our students (and their students) can understand and relate to. Narratives have been recognised as a meaningful way to "transmit the richness and complexity of cultural and social phenomena" (Ladson-Billings 1994:x).

We plan to interweave an analysis of the process to enable us to question the actions taken and whether or not they seem to be of value to Kulai people (Osborne & Tait 1998:89). This is done with a consciousness of explicating some views of what was experienced. The report was written largely from the perspective of active participants in the preschool worksite, observing and analysing what was happening.

Views of Culture

An array of possible explanations of the meaning of 'culture' were explored in the literature prior to commencing the project. Techniques such as "the practice of storytelling, art, song and ceremony", plus activities linked to food preparation were found to be useful tools for the staff to use in teaching the children an awareness of country and the need to care for it (Richard Baker, Jocelyn Davies and Elspeth Young 2001:xxii).

In 'Journeying with Culture at Kulai' the primacy of local issues was seized and utilised in the development of resource materials and activities with stories from the Gumbaingirr nation embedded. The concept of articulating with culture culminated when the children performed the story in the NAIDOC concert and the big book was completed. These 'acts' served as a bridge across the gap between Auntie Marie Edwards' traditional story and the current context. Clifford (2001 cited in Everett 2001:13) described the process this way:

articulation theory perceives continuity in culture as transformation. It takes into account the ways what elements of 'tradition' are hooked into modernity and how this is often connected with political manoeuvring between and within 'cultures'. Through 'articulation' Indigenous people, for example, are able to strategically connect and disconnect both from their own 'tradition'; and from political associations with the dominant culture.

A culture program, says Linda King (1999:245) should assist the children to learn more about their multiple cultures with aspects of 'language, social

organization and ritual spaces. King (1999:249) goes on to remind us that the place where the activities are conducted is important in the cultural transmission process and in affirming identity.

At Kulai a whole range of cultures intersect and 'culture' has become "what local people know and do, and what local communities have known and done for generations" (Warren et al 1996, cited in Semali 1999:307). By sharing with children the culture that is known locally a bridge should emerge to link multiple ways of knowing (Thomas 1994:11). This is done with the recognition that "the stories, songs and poems capture our passion – these are the true account of us as a people" (Lehman 1994:89)

The importance of expanding the curricula to make education more culturally inclusive has been recognised by the Australian Government's Ministerial Council of Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs Task Force on Indigenous Education (MYCEETYA 2000:13). Their report notes:

All Australians have the right to an education which allows them to be strong in two ways: to be strong in their own culture, and to be strong in the skills that allow them equal choice from the same range of opportunities and futures.

This could be interpreted as ratifying the aims and objectives of the Kulai Project, which includes assisting everyone connected with the Preschool to "understand and acknowledge the value of remaining strong in their culture ... in a way which affirms identity" (MYCEETYA 2000:16).

Early Childhood Approaches to Culture

One influence on the Kulai Preschool curriculum has been research ideas published in the Early Childhood literature. MacNaughton and Williams (1999:66) emphasised the need to be immersed in an environment where "there are strong and positive images of their own racial and cultural group around them".

When Leah Curry-Rood (2001:68) was asked what the greatest resource was we could share with children, she replied:

Language ... Sharing stories about what happened to them or to someone in their family is something most three years olds enjoy. It is the beginning of storytelling for them and should be encouraged.

Retelling of the local Elders stories would seem to fit Curry-Rood's criteria of language activities about events relating to someone in the family. If as Early Childhood Educators we can model for young children the act and art of storytelling with photographs of themselves and/or their friends, we help to immerse them in the literacy process. In this manner literacy can become an accepted part of life (Diaz et al 2001:17) that encourages the use of culturally appropriate languages, such as Aboriginal English, to present stories and to make meaning of what the children are seeing. This should help to broaden their understanding of what literacy is. Opportunities are in place to "challenge, scaffold and extend" (Diaz et al 2001:18) knowledge using this local material. They pin-point this task as the teachers' responsibility to forge

“links between children’s home and community experiences” (Diaz et al 2001:59). The teacher educator has a valuable opportunity to foster such practices.

Evolving resources: the “Dolphin Story’ big book.

The AIATSIS project: ‘Journeying with Culture at Kulai’, began by the teacher educator getting together with all staff at the preschool to explore what ‘culture’ meant in the local setting. The picture that emerged of ‘culture’ was framed around those aspects that impact on the way we live, including language (Aboriginal English), food, art, music, songs, ceremonies/performances and family links/relationships. On the same day staff identified local resources they wanted to develop to add to the preschool teaching materials and program.

Similar aspects of culture were explored by yarning with the families and wider community at the end of term barbecues and the official opening of the Preschool extensions. The families were asked what culture should be taught in the curriculum. In the process a number of people volunteered their services to share their skills and knowledges with the children. Most families said they were happy to leave decisions, about the curriculum, to the teachers.

At the opening ceremony the children played tapping sticks in time to a recording of contemporary Aboriginal music. The families and wider Aboriginal community were so impressed, by what they saw in person and/or on the television news that night, they asked when they could expect to see the children perform again.

The teachers identified a consciousness of spirituality as being important to lift their overall understanding of its impact on their work. Consequently a further workshop that focused on aspects of ‘spirituality’ and where it fitted within the operation of the preschool was held. This was facilitated by Margaret Somerville, a teacher educator from UNE.

Between the workshops I operated partly in a scaffolding role one-to-one with staff on site and completing practical tasks (Chupp 2000:110) relating to material development, such as enlarging photographs and preparing drafts of the big books. However much of my role was what Lederach (2000:47) describes as one of “accompaniment-in-discovery” with everyone being knowledge sharers and learners.

At the Culture Workshop, Leanne identified her interest in one of the local Elder’s stories. This was ‘Nan’s Dolphin Story’ told by Auntie Marie Edwards to Margaret Somerville (1999:18) and recorded in ‘Arrawarra Meeting Place’. Auntie Marie is an Elder and the oldest living person from Yarrawarra.

Well the dolphins would be travellin’ the fish along, you know. And when they’d see them they would say, they’d sing out in their lingo. And the dolphins’d all come around in groups, bring all the fish in. And the fish’d all be comin’ up in the waves and flappin’ and flappin’. They’d run down and get ‘em, get what they wanted, and the

dolphins'd keep goin' again. But they'd cooee, sing out in lingo. Yeah, when the tide goes back, see, they're laying there, and they just took what they wanted – bream, whiting or jewfish or tailor, schnapper or whatever! They used to cooee out to them dolphins. Well look at the dolphins today, they know everything! (Marie Edwards 1/9/97).

We worked together using an action research model (Robertson 2000; Wadsworth 1997; Grundy 1995) to restructure the story into a version which we thought would fit with the logic of the 3 to 5 year olds attending Kulai. Aboriginal English was utilised in the text. The material was trialed in storytime with the children and redrafted before being sent to the committee of Garby Elders at Yarrawarra to seek their approval.

Leanne also planned a children's performance of the 'Dolphin Story' for the Kulai families during NAIDOC week. Each child constructed a large cardboard cut-out of a fish or dolphin to carry during the performance. The children practiced for weeks, each taking on the role of a dolphin or fish. On the day of the performance as Leanne read the story, the 'fish' pretended to swim towards the beach with the 'dolphins' herding them from behind. In the background was a large stage prop of the ocean that had been creatively decorated with sea creatures and plants made by the children.

The children gave each adult a clam shell, they had painted, with the words "Thank you" inscribed. The celebration culminated with the sharing of traditional and non-traditional food and many yarns over lunch.

By involving the children in these ways, Leanne "opened up the interactive processes" (Joanne Reid 2001:13), allowing all, the opportunity to be a part of the evolving story. Further by utilising the information passed on by local Elders, she produced "real text for real world purposes" (Reid 1997), immersing the children in social literacy practice.

Encapsulating the Storyline

Sometimes you are left with a sense that there is a power/force much greater than you influencing what happens. Who knows? The experiences surrounding the photographic shoot for the 'Dolphin Story' seemed to personify this.

It was planned that a Kulai family should represent the people in Auntie Marie's story. In thinking about which family might feel most comfortable and trusting to be the characters photographed for the story we thought of Tareik's (aged four years) extended family. His Mum, Alison is the president of the Kulai parent's committee. Julie discussed the plans with them. Alison agreed they would be part of it, along with her parents. We showed them a draft copy of the story using some of Margaret Somerville's photographs of Yarrawarra people. They looked through the draft and affirmed it was okay to go ahead with the filming.

On the day planned for the photographic shoot, the weather was quite overcast. We set out for the beach in Julie's van, so we could all go together. Tony (Tareik's pop) and Helen sat in the back. Even though Helen had only just met Tony, he was keen to talk and share his knowledges.

Tony reflected that when Julie first asked him about being involved he did not really understand what she meant, but later became aware:

T: When you said the 'Dolphin Story' it clicked. My grandfather told me the 'Dolphin Story' when I was a boy about Tareik's age. It was his version of the 'Dolphin Story'. He and Auntie Marie were brother and sister you know. It will be so good for Tareik and the other kids to have the story recorded.

By the time we got to the beach, the clouds had parted to let the sun through and to give us brilliant light for the photographs. Tareik danced happily along the sand and together the family 'played out' the story, much as it had been told by Auntie Marie.

The story had special significance for Julie also, as Auntie Marie is her father's sister. Julie encapsulated a depth of understanding, personifying the spirit of the moment and linking with the past to the present in the series of photographs she took. Each line of the story, printed below, was superimposed on an A3 sized photograph to form the big book:

*One day we went to the beach – Mum, Nan, Pop and Tareik
"Heah Nan look at all the dolphins"
Nan and Pop yelled out to the dolphins in lingo
to bring some fish in for us.
The dolphins brought all the fish in.
You could see all the fish flappin' and flappin' in the waves.
We'd all run down to the beach and get all the fish.
There were bream
and whiting
and tailer
and jewfish
or whatever we wanted.
The dolphins went out for more fish.
So Nan and Pop cooed out thank you to the dolphins.
We know the dolphins are our special friends.*

After the photographic shoot, Tony told again how good he felt about the story being recorded for the children. He also talked about his art work, explaining his current work painting at Yarrawarra four days a week. The central theme of his art work is the dolphin. He asked if we would like him to paint a dolphin picture for the cover of the big book. We assured him we would

Back in the van, a strong sense of mutuality continued in the relationship between us all. Julie drove the family home and we paused together to reflect on the events of the day. During that time of reflection a violent electrical storm hit Coffs Harbour bringing torrential rain. We were in a safe place and sensed we were being cared for by a higher spirit.

Reflections on Outcomes from the Experience

The Ministerial Council of Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs Task Force on Indigenous Education (MCEETYA 2000:6) identified “appropriate professional development of staff” as a priority area for the Australian Government. Workplace learning experiences, facilitated by teacher educators, provide avenues for sharing theory and practice relevant to local communities (Mark Fettes 1998:267). The staff brought to the Kulai, their expert and intimate knowledge of the local community; the Elders shared their stories and the teacher educators used their skills as facilitators to enable the process and to encourage collaboration. This has enabled a curriculum to be developed “that celebrates spirituality, diversity, service and respect (Fettes 1998:269) as goals Kulai’s teachers and teacher educators are working towards.

All teacher education was conducted in an inclusive experiential manner. Workshops were always supplemented by food as a medium to aid communication. Semali (1999:245) describes the sense of taste as one that “transcends cultural boundaries in a way that our intellectual capacities do not”. Food seems to have the power to relax people, as if its sharing induces the will to exchange ideas and discuss issues. Thus food could be described as providing a bridge between cultures.

Much of the literature on educational practice emphasises the need, short and long term, to ‘seize the window of opportunity’ and or ‘maximise the teachable moment’ whilst it is available. The ‘Journeying with Culture at Kulai’ project has presented many opportunities to extend the teachers’ skills and confidence in an informal context.

Researchers (eg Semali 1999; Reid 1997) have made us aware of how locally developed literacy materials can impact in a positive manner our lives. Semali (1999:315-316) explained it this way:

To (re)value community involvement is one strategy to acknowledge the impact of culture on people, history, knowledge and experiences ... actually work as a catalyst for redressing the power imbalance that already exists between knowledges.

At Kulai the Elders stories are much more than a part of local history. The Elders remain the knowledge holders and guides for their people. Aboriginal English is the common language of the Elders and also throughout the community. This language is affirmed in the Preschool curriculum.

An Aboriginal Education Assistant at school near Armidale, Audrey Strangway (personal communication 2001) reported that the local elders will not come into her primary school to share stories as they would feel shamed. She added she felt many do not know the stories to be able to retell them. Over time this same situation may be repeated in Coffs Harbour, so writing the stories down could be seen as a useful way to ensure the information can continue to be used.

Lessons to be learnt

The ease with which the Hart family engaged, with the teacher educator, on the day of the photographic shoot seemed to have much to do with the links

the story had with their past. The initial contact became a reality at least in part due to a 'message of trust' being transmitted by Julie. There was possibly a secondary link through Margaret Somerville and the Yarrowarra books which also established the situation as being an okay one to 'work' in. The lesson here is a reminder to non-Aboriginal teacher educators to avoid rushing into asking questions and trying to 'make' conversation. Rather we should listen more, hold back and allow time for engagement to occur (ChrissieJoy Marshall personal communication 2001; Joseph Miller 2000:22). Where established relationships exist, let those people 'talk you into' the scene rather than push yourself forward. The experience from this project would suggest, as hard as one pushes forward, the greater degree of resistance that is likely to appear. Allow each individual to decide when they are ready to network and thus projects will take their natural course and fulfil local needs.

The situation that can be created by teacher educators through workbased research is described well by Sandra Suchet (2001:123) example:

One of the greatest lessons to come out of this research is the potential and power of networking and forming alliances. Coalitions and networks at all scales are vital for local groups and their representative organisations to be heard, for their ways of knowing to be recognised and engaged with, and for more effective and informed processes to be adopted. It is important that these alliances are not based on stereotypes or set models of international relations but, rather, the commonality of experiences and motivations see a multiple, fluid set of networks emerge (Barsg 1991; Jhappan 1992 cited in Suchet).

This statement recognises the importance of teacher educators moving with the community and capitalising on local knowledge. Further they must respect and value this knowledge in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity to help achieve the project's goals. An alternative approach would have been for the teacher educator to go in as 'expert' with all the answers and direct how everyone was to think and act. The consequence would likely have been passive resistance and time misspent all round (Suchet 2001:133-134; McConaghy 1997:46).

Conclusion

The Kulai people and the broader local Aboriginal community in the Coffs Harbour area, possess a wealth of knowledges and cultural information. For the last 40,000 years or more this knowledge has been passed down in an oral way. The AIATSI project recognised that there was a need to develop teachers' skills further to work across and between cultures – "to strategically connect and disconnect" (Clifford 2001 cited in Everett 2001:13). The performance of 'Nan's Dolphin Story' and development of the photographic big book provide examples of the teachers in practice. In turn the teachers have shown how Elders stories can be recorded in a text format to introduce living literacy in a relevant and meaningful way for the next generation.

The teacher education process has been embedded in a workplace learning environment where each participant freely communicated and trusted those involved. It is these ingredients that seem critical to facilitating the collaboration that enabled interactive learning to occur between the adults

involved (Rumsey & Knott 2001). In turn this facilitated the production and utilisation of resource materials that would be both valued and valuable (Richard Baker, Jocelyn Davies & Elspeth Young 2001:142) to the Kulai community. The products of this project serve to build a positive self-image for the staff and pride in their cultural identity.

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