Teaching from Country: ICTs for Remote Indigenous Knowledge Authorities as Tertiary Educators

Text from the Seminar by Michael Christie, CDU 25thJune 2008

Prof Kym Fraser rang me earlier this year and suggested I apply for a senior fellowship to the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. I thought it would be a good opportunity to apply what we've been working on in recent years quite specifically to questions of tertiary learning and teaching, so with help from a lot of people, we filled out the form. We gave the project the title: **Increasing the participation of Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Tertiary teaching through the use of emerging digital technologies**

At the beginning of May, the Carrick Institute, which by this time had been renamed the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, offered me the fellowship after an interview in Sydney.

The Learning and Teaching Council have given me the opportunity to revise my fellowship application, and the first step has been to simplify the title. I now want to call the project "*Teaching From Country, ICTs for Remote Indigenous Knowledge Authorities as Tertiary Educators*". The basic aim of the project is to have Indigenous Knowledge authorities, on country, using computers, teaching language, culture, fine arts, music and other things to students at CDU and other universities.

According to its website, "The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) has a mission to enhance learning and teaching in Australian higher education and is dedicated to improving the student learning experience". They "work in the national interest with higher education institutions, discipline groups and individuals as a collaborative and supportive partner in change, providing access to a network of knowledge, ideas and people" and "recognise, reward and support outstanding teaching and practice through a suite of award, fellowship and grant schemes". A senior fellow is expected to lead a team of international scholars in a project of significance, to contribute to the life of the ALTC in a variety of ways, including through conducting an extended seminar.

In my interview in Sydney, and at this first public seminar, I wanted to make clear that the project which I plan to implement and the leadership which I am expected to show, comes out of a long history of my personal involvement with quite specific people in quite specific places working on everyday, practical problems. I will have more to say about what this means for leadership later, but for now, I want to talk about four different projects which have all contributed to make possible the success of the Teaching From Country application.

Where have we come from?

Yolŋu Studies

www.cdu.edu.au/Yolŋustudies

First, the Yolŋu studies program.

When the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was formed at Northern Territory University in 1994 I was invited to come and start up a languages and cultural program. After a year of negotiations with local Larakia people and Yolŋu elders in Arnhemland, and extensive work on curriculum and resources development, the course started with Waymamba Gaykamaŋu appointed as lecturer. Today she is retiring after thirteen years of serving in that position and we are thanking and honouring her as part of this seminar.

A key feature of the Yolŋu studies program, which received the Prime Minster's award for the best tertiary teaching program in Australia in 2005, was the ongoing supervision of the program by Yolŋu elders in Arnhemland, and the incorporation of Yolŋu knowledge practices into the ways in which coursework students undertake their study and their research.

Taking Yolŋu knowledge practices seriously means working through some quite complex questions – like what s knowledge? How do we make and verify truth claims? What are key differences between the ways in which academic knowledge is produced and understood, and the way in which Aboriginal knowledge on country is produced and understood?

Taking Yolŋu knowledge practices seriously also involves maintaining active Yolŋu governance of knowledge work, even and especially where digital technologies and long distances are involved.

This is a photo of the last class which Waymamba taught – a group of new teachers sent to the Territory, doing a short course on Yolŋu languages and culture.

Where have we come from?

Indigenous Knowledge and Resource Management in Northern Australia

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www.cdu.edu.au/ik

After we had been delivering the Yolŋu studies program for a few years, we were invited to apply for a grant from the Australian Research Council to explore Indigenous Knowledge and Research Management in Northern Australia (IKRMNA). The research centred around the use of digital technologies (cameras, computers etc) in the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. We found that Aboriginal people we worked with using emerging digital technologies preferred to keep their own digital collections rather than storing them in larger databases at the community level or on the internet. We also found that different digital solutions were needed in different places for the different knowledge requirements which people on country prioritised. Instead of trying to develop a solution which suited everyone, we worked towards a range of emerging solutions for different people. To make the ways we worked and the outcomes clear, we developed an extensive website (www.cdu.edu.au/ik) which has a record of the process, some digital objects we prepared, academic papers, and much else. Trevor van Weeren designed and maintained the website, and prepared the image of young children using digital technologies in the presence of their elders. The new Teaching from Country project will apply some of the key findings of the IKRMNA project to improving university teaching and learning of Indigenous Studies. We will also use a website designed by Trevor, to let everyone know about what we're doing.

Where have we come from?

Internetworking

Communities

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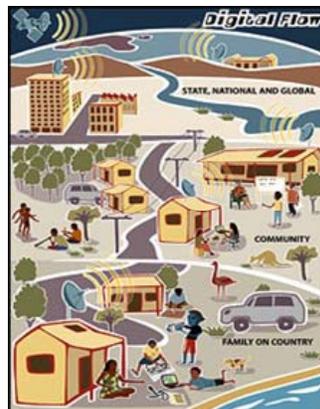
www.cdu.edu.au/inc

In the course of the ARC project we identified two further research problems: 1 How might the use of digital technologies enhance the sustainability of traditional lifestyles on homeland centres and very remote communities? 2. What sort of technical systems (hardware, software and connectivity) would best suit small remote communities wishing to use digital technologies for business, education, commerce etc?

We applied for money from the CDU Research Infrastructure fund, to support a   range of small programs "in the areas of Information and Communication Technology and Capacity Building in remote communities" (see ww.cdu.edu.au/inc) . Over three years this program has involved ten academic staff from four different schools within CDU, and been involved in twenty different small and large projects with a range of funding - from the Dell Foundation to the DEEWR.

This new Teaching From Country program will implement some of the findings of that research program in remote teaching.

The photograph is of Jackie Nguluwidi at Mapuru homeland centre using a computer supplied by the INC project, working with children at his small homeland centre school.

The graphic, prepared by Trevor van Weeren who is also on the *Teaching From Country* team, represents the ways in which digital objects 'flow' and circulate at different levels – at home on country, at the local community level, and national, internationally and globally.

The third research program which forms the background for our new project involves the professionalization of Indigenous bicultural consultants for cross-cultural research work. This work started with a Yolŋu project investigating what can be done to help Yolŋu people sleeping under the stars in the parks and beaches of Darwin – commonly known as 'long-grassers'. The project was instigated by Yolŋu, and gave us the opportunity to work collaboratively to look carefully at a research methodology which remains faithful to Yolŋu ethics and protocols, and at the same time, provides reliable and useful research outcomes for government. The report can be found at http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/Yolŋustudies/docs/Longgrass_report.pdf

Other Indigenous researchers at the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems further developed the methodology for investigating issues around longgrassers from other Aboriginal groups – Tiwi, Anindilyakwa, Burerra and Murrinh.

Our aim is to help bilingual, bicultural Yolŋu develop the professional skills to do the difficult work of cross-cultural consultancies, under the supervision of community elders, and in collaboration with the university. Our other aim is to articulate carefully the difficult philosophical and methodological work which is to be done if differences between and within cultural groups are taken seriously, and complexity is to be preserved. So far, the Yolŋu consultants have come together to evaluate financial literacy training in remote communities, to report on gambling-related harm in the Yolŋu community, to discuss Yolŋu perspectives on gifted and talented young people – the future leaders of Aboriginal Australia, and what schools, teachers and governments should do to identify and support them, and on the use of digital multimedia in cross-cultural medical interpreting. Some of this work is being reported on a new website www.cdu.edu.au/yaci.

Teaching from Country: What is the goal?

Aboriginal Knowledge authorities…

on country…

Using digital technologies…

…talking

…teaching

…explaining

…advocating

…answering questions…

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So now we turn to the *Teaching from Country* project. I argued in the application that we are now in a position to develop some good workable systems for Aboriginal knowledge authorities in remote places on line to become active in teaching at Australian universities, about their languages, cultures, arts, histories and philosophies.

Indigenous elders from remote communities have had little opportunity to contribute actively to academic teaching in Australian universities, yet there is widespread and increasing acknowledgement of the potential of Indigenous knowledge to enhance our understanding of the environment and ecological systems, of linguistic and biological diversity, culture, history, philosophy, art, health and much more.

The collaboration will develop, implement, evaluate and report upon systems for the properly supervised inclusion and active participation of Indigenous knowledge holders living 'on country', in Australian university academic courses, through the use of emerging digital technologies.

The images here are a map of some of the very remote Arnhemland communities we are working with (from another website to do with family-level microbusiness on remote homeland centres www.cdu.edu.au/aflf), and Yiŋiya and his daughter doing knowledge work on a computer in the School of Australian Knowledge systems at Charles Darwin University.

**Teaching from country:
What must we do?**

- best technology
- Yolŋu authority
- best software
- proper pay
- intellectual property protection

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We are addressing five key quesitons:

1 *A technical question:* Given that many of the greatest authorities on Indigenous knowledge live in very remote contexts, what technical arrangements can be put into place to allow them to become active university teachers on their own terms and help others in their communities to do so?

2 *A question of governance*: Given the complex and various ancestral laws which govern who may speak on particular issues, and represent particular histories to particular audiences, how can clan affiliated elders supervise and advise the ways in which their knowledges are at work in a university?

3 *A question of pedagogy*: Given the significance of digital objects (photographs, satellite images, videos etc) in contemporary knowledge work, and the need for their owners and producers to actively represent these artefacts, how can current Web 2.0 tools and collaborative software be used to add authority and authenticity to traditional practices of teaching and learning in Indigenous contexts?

4 *A question of professionalisation*: What sorts of employment and remuneration practices would best suit the modes of Indigenous involvement which prove most useful to tertiary teaching?

5 *A question of Intellectual Property*: What questions of ownership and distribution emerge or are resolved by active online teaching of Indigenous knowledge by its owners?

Teaching from country:
Who?...starting with Arnhemland Yolŋu

So who is to be invovled?

Our confidence that we can do this project well starts with a long history of collaboration, over thirty years, with a large group of confident, knowledgeable, bicultural Yolŋu who have strong connections with their own ancestral traditions, and with the Balanda (nonAboriginal) world.

Only a few of them are pictured here. You can learn about some of them from the various websites mentioned above.

Teaching from Country:
Who?

International experts

• Helen Verran University of Melbourne

• Geoff Bowker University of Santa Clara, USA

• Wade Chambers Institute of American Indian Arts

• Paul Dourish University of California, Irvine

The ALTC fellowship requires international connections. We are confident that we have attracted a group of the best international scholars to help us think through some of the complexities of what we are addressing. They are:

Helen Verran, a philosopher from the University of Melbourne. Helen first worked with Yolŋu in the 1980s on the ground-breaking 'garma' collaborative curriculum project at Yirrkala. She worked with Dr Marika who died suddenly in May this year, and who was hoping to be on the team of international experts. Their work opened up epistemological, ontological and

metaphysical questions around how divergent knowledge traditions can work together. Helen has been involved in the ongoing Yolŋu research work through the CDU School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge systems which, detailed above, has led up to this project.

Geoff Bowker from the University of Santa Clara, in California, has been working on the representation of indigenous knowledge – this is one of the themes of his recent book. He is also working with the World Bank and the National Science Foundation to scope an effective knowledge infrastructure for Africa which is sensitive to local knowledge and culture.

David Wade Chambers is of Cherokee, English and Welsh ancestry. His academic field is the history and cultural studies of science, exploring the relationship of Western science to indigenous ways of knowing the world. He is the Director of the Native Eyes Distance Learning Program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM.

Paul Dourish's research and teaching work are in the areas of Ubiquitous Computing, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work, and the Social Studies of Science and Technology. He is working on, among many other things, how advanced information technologies cause us to re-encounter the spaces through which we move.

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**Teaching from Country:
Who?**

Australian Reference Group

- Wendy Brady
- Jeanie Bell
- Robynne Quiggan
- Yvonne Cadet-James

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I am also counting on receiving some good advice from some key Australian. This Australian Reference group is made up of:

the senior Yolŋu advisers to the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems at Charles Darwin University. Some of these are consultants whose photos you have already seen.

Prof Wendy Brady, Head of School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, CDU, who has published on Indigenous knowledge and Globalisation, and Australian Indigenous art and cultural studies.

Yvonne Cadet-James, Head of School Australian Indigenous Studies, James Cook University, interested in helping us think through how our experiences in the Teaching from Country project in the NT may be relevant to work in remote Queensland, or vice versa

Jeanie Bell, whom I have known for over twenty years, is Head of School of Education, Arts & Social Sciences, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. She also will have good advice to give, and be interested in how our work might apply to theirs.

Robynne Quiggan, Indigenous IP lawyer from Vincent-Quiggin Consulting in Sydney. We have worked together on a team reporting on Aboriginal intellectual property issues for the Desert Knowledge CRC. She is looking forward to helping us think through how traditional and Australian laws can talk to each other.
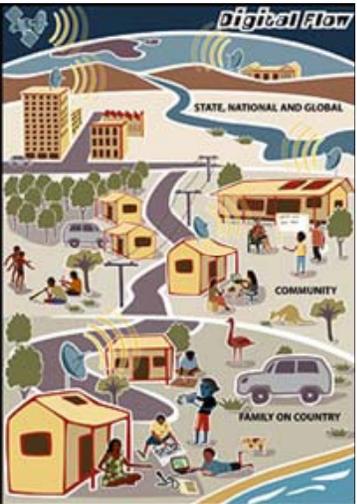
And then, also essential to this project and its history are

John Greatorex whom I first met at Elcho in 1976, and without whom none of this would be possible. He is a great networker, a great organiser, a great communicator and a great friend and colleague.

Trevor whom I have known for over twenty years, who made this graphic and designed and the other one above (and this document), a great thinker and a great designer.

Bryce, artist, Yolŋu Studies student, and technical researcher who helps us think through a wide range of issues and beyond, and works behind the scenes on the many thankless tasks of keeping people's hardware and software and connectivity going and tinkering with new possibilities.

Sarah Scott, lecturer in Indigenous Art at CDU, continues a long collaboration between SAIKS (and before that FIRE, and before that FATSIS, and before that CAIS) and the School of Creative Arts and Humanities (which has been renamed an equal number of times). She has been a Yolŋu Studies students, and is keen to find ways for her students to hear from artists in remote places talking about their work.

Teaching from Country: Where to now?

- Meeting of Yolŋu advisers - today
- Finalise arrangements with ALTC - July 31st
- Finalise international connections
- Finalise reference group
- Set up
  - systems in various places
  - people on country
  - Courses
  - CDU structures
  - website
- Work with ALTC
- Trial teaching
- Extended seminar
- Evaluation

www.cdu.edu.au/tfc

We have already set the ball rolling with a seminar and a meeting of the Yolŋu advisers. This slide shows the things to be done. Look for the website in a month or two and you will see things starting to grow.

Special thanks…

Isaac Brown
Terry Kessaris
Marcia Langton
Sue Stanton
Maryann Bin-Sallik
Sonia Smallacombe
Linda Ford
Terry Dunbar
Lorna Murakami-Gold
Wendy Brady

Barbara White
Kym Fraser
Helen Rysavy

Betty Marrnganyin
Dr Marika

Finally, a few more acknowledgements.

On the left is a list of Indigenous academics of CDU who have been supportive of me personally, and/or supportive of the Yolŋu involvement at CDU over many years. It is good to get a chance to pause and acknowledge their commitment. On the right are technical and design people who continue to be good colleagues. Below are the two people we commemorated at the beginning of this seminar, recently who both worked tirelessly on language, pedagogy and intercultural communication over many years, and whom we honour today.

Thanks

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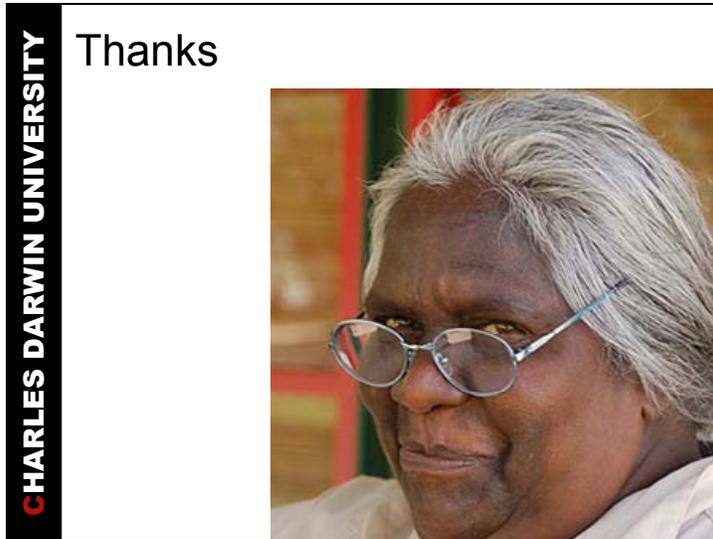
A final note: The ALTC emphasizes leadership in education, and is interested in understanding and supporting good leadership in education.

This project, and the ones that go before it, succeeds through wide collaborations across great distances – cultural, lingusitic, philosophical and geographical.

I am surrounded by people who know more than I do about all the key issues in this project: Aboriginal knowledge practices, digital technologies, hardware, software, connectivity, intellectual property provisions, contemporary western philosophy, academic and Indigenous governance regimes than I do. What is the role of leadership in all this? It remains to be seen.

We already know that projects like this succeed when people work together respectfully in good faith, collaborating carefully on ways of gong forward together.

Waymamba has taught us much about how this can work, and I conclude with thanking her once gain for her hard work and friendship over many years. Thankyou.