

THE KINSHIP ON-LINE PROJECT AND ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper is an account of Aboriginal community engagement in relation to the design and development of a Project being undertaken through an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) grant to develop Indigenous Online Cultural Teaching & Sharing (Kinship On-line Project), which is an on-line cultural education workshop based around Aboriginal Kinship systems used in Australia. The Project is built on an existing face-to-face interactive presentation based on the theme of Australian Aboriginal Kinship systems developed by Lynette Riley.

The on-line cultural education workshop is being designed as an experiential learning environment for two reasons. Firstly, there is a long denial of Aboriginal knowledges and their importance in contemporary Australia. Secondly, the experiential format is used in Aboriginal learning and is therefore an appropriate way of conveying these knowledge systems. The Project reflects where possible Aboriginal knowledge sharing processes, bringing this into mainstream teaching of humanities and social science related to subjects, such as sociology, law, education and social work. Aboriginal knowledge sharing has been adapted to this experiential learning environment via software design.

The paper outlines the community engagement process for the Kinship On-line Project in the context of Indigenous methodological, epistemological and ethical considerations by juxtaposing Indigenous and western ways of teaching and research and exploring in greater detail the differences between them.

Introduction

The Kinship On-Line Project is being undertaken through an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) grant to develop 'Indigenous Online Cultural Teaching & Sharing Resources'. The Project will pilot on-line cultural education workshop based on an existing face-to-face presentation. The process of constructing the material involves developing a pedagogical framework for cultural competence at the university level. The Project concerns the practical creation of multiple knowledges and approaches. That is, taking Indigenous cultural practice and using the teaching of that practice, within a western system for Non-Indigenous people working in social systems that impact on Aboriginal people. The intention of the Project is to develop on-line learning tools to incorporate Aboriginal community, Elders, students and staff narratives into a workshop and game environment for cross-cultural education focusing on the different responsibilities in Aboriginal societies that still impact on contemporary Aboriginal people.

The pedagogical framework takes into account Aboriginal epistemology both in methods and content, so that learning will be a process that builds on Indigenous cultures and identity (NAEC, 1985). To achieve such ends, the Project team is a partnership between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal academics and an Aboriginal community to respectfully and productively embed Aboriginal knowledges and cultural practices into university teaching. This is achieved by conducting research with Aboriginal people in a safe place for them to share their stories and cultural knowledge. It will also provide a place for educators and students to access Aboriginal knowledges relevant to different University disciplines. The Project has the dual purpose of using the narratives collected from Aboriginal people to embed in the on-line Project that will yield mutual benefit to both decolonising mainstream curriculum and being a site of empowerment in which Aboriginal people "are able to voice their thoughts and experiences in meaningful ways and participate in the process of knowledge production so that social transformations may be achieved" (Blodgett, Schinke, Smit, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011, p. 523). It will bring Aboriginal knowledge sharing processes into the mainstream teaching of humanities and social science related subjects, such as: sociology, law, education and social work. To achieve this, the Kinship On-Line Project adopts what Blodgett et al (2011) refer to as a "cultural praxis" in that the Project design and delivery utilises complementary Indigenous, social constructionist and critical methodologies (Blodgett et al, 2011, p. 523).

This Project will enable educators to teach in a way that respects and allows Aboriginal voices to be highlighted in lectures and tutorials (Healy-Ingram, 2011, p. 70). The inclusion of Aboriginal peoples' first-hand accounts of Indigenous knowledges in mainstream curricula will also reinforce the decentring of the white Non-Aboriginal academic as an expert on 'Aboriginality' via the incorporation of Aboriginal Standpoint Pedagogy (Nakata, 2007) into teaching. This will allow educators to provide Non-Aboriginal students with a richer and deeper understanding of the issues that are presented to them in studying Aboriginal content.

The Project is built on the theme of Australian Aboriginal Kinship systems, which has been designed by Lynette Riley for teaching university, professionals, school students and their teachers. The Project is developing an on-line workshop comprised of videos of the face-to-face Kinship presentation, interleaved with short role-play games for students to gain some understanding of the different sections and levels of relationships involved in Aboriginal Kinship. To complement this Kinship presentation, a second part of the online system is being developed to provide a repository of Aboriginal community narratives that will be incorporated into a set of interactive scenarios. This involves recording Aboriginal people's narratives and providing an opportunity for them to voice their issues, concerns and the impact of cross-cultural miscommunications, misunderstanding and the effect this has on their lives.

When the program is run in the on-line environment it will involve two stages. First students complete the on-line simulated face-to-face workshop sessions. In the workshop sessions questions will be

posed about the various effects of European colonisation, such as the teaching of 'Pidgin' English language and forced relocation of individuals outside their Nation and Clan boundaries. In the second stage, students will be placed in different scenarios and professional contexts in Aboriginal communities in an on-line environment. Students through the role of a service provider, researcher, or policy developer, can negotiate the narratives of the community with various service and social issues as they arise in what we refer to as scenarios.

The different scenarios in the second stage will be based on three interconnected influences: (1) Kinship relations, (2) cultural conflict, and (3) professional systems and workers roles, giving both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students the opportunity to select scenarios relating to a range of professional contexts, such as: policy, research and service provision, in urban and rural Aboriginal communities. For example, the student who is learning about the protocols that the Non-Indigenous researcher needs to follow in engaging with Aboriginal communities or organisations will be directed into a cultural conflict scenario. Whereas another student, involved in developing personal relationships within an Aboriginal community, would be directed into a scenario based on Kinship levels or be offered a scenario based on relevant professional systems. This will ensure that students gain a better understanding of the different scenarios and contexts that exist in working across cultural groups.

The teaching framework is being developed through engagement with Aboriginal community members, University teaching staff and Aboriginal students, collecting their stories for incorporation into the two different stages of the on-line teaching tool. Their stories will be in the public domain, but will be password protected. Importantly, the methodological and ethical considerations provide the forefront for the design of this Project. A process that took nearly twelve months in the initial phases prior to the grant application being submitted; a further six months after the grant application was successful for ethics to be submitted and approved; and another six months before stories were collected from the Aboriginal community involved in the Project.

This paper describes how the Project addresses the issues pertaining to Aboriginal community engagement, methodology and ethics, giving the Project not just validity within an academic context, but to ensure that first and foremost it has validity among Aboriginal people. In doing so, the paper sets out an Aboriginal community engagement model compared with an example of a Western research model (see Figure 2) which the authors hope will be useful to other researchers who wish to engage in research with Aboriginal people and/or communities.

First we preface our discussion of the research design in the context of Aboriginal engagement with a discussion of embedding Aboriginal cultural knowledge in education and how this relates to the Project at hand. This background is critical in explaining how the narratives we collect from Aboriginal people will be used. We then discuss the ethical considerations of Aboriginal engagement in the context of our exemplified Western research processes and provide a comparison between our adopted approach and the exemplified Western research processes. We do this to offer the reader a greater understanding of the differences between Aboriginal approaches and the exemplified western approaches in research involving Aboriginal peoples, particularly when embedding Aboriginal knowledge into western teaching.

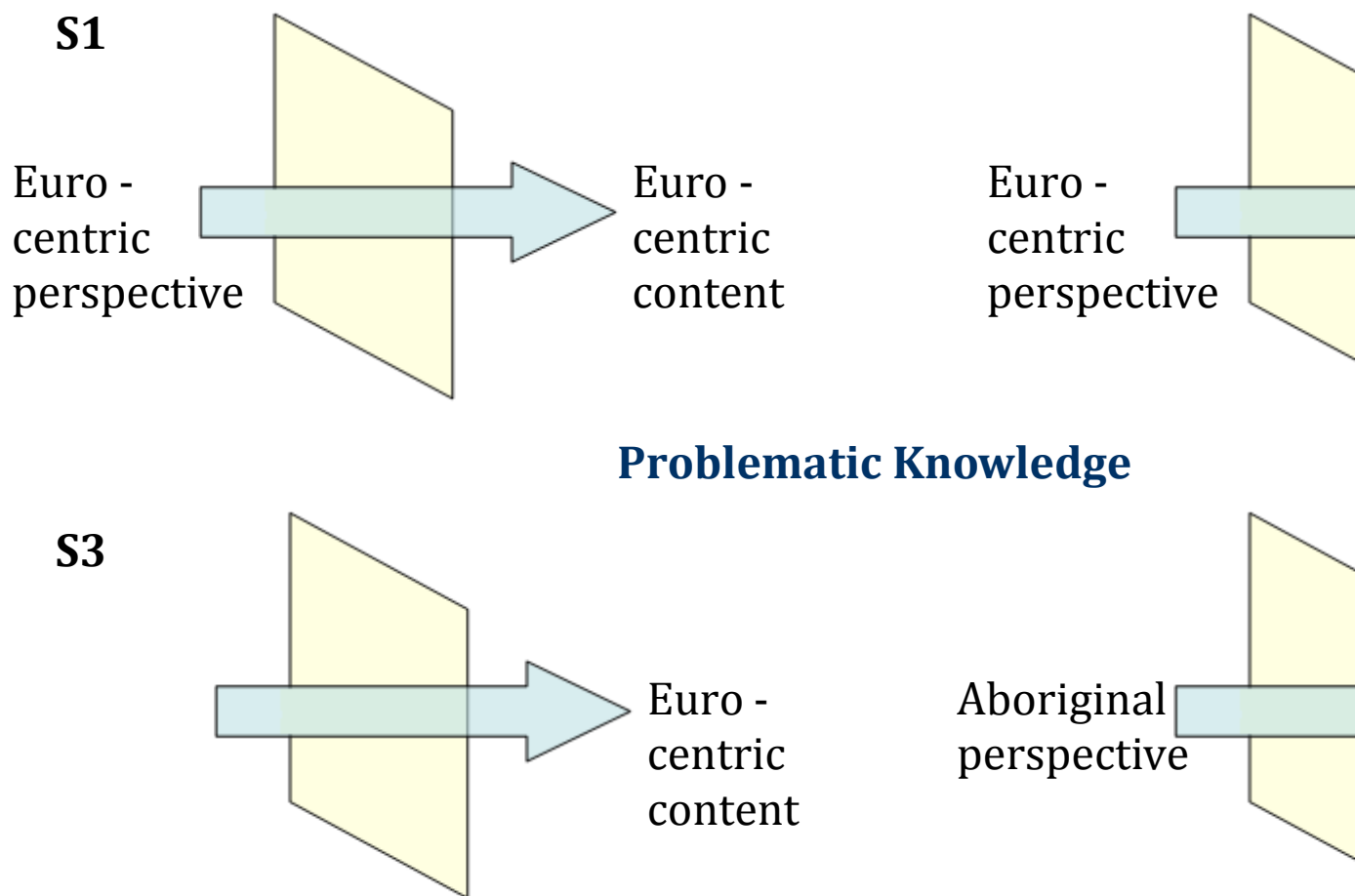
Embedding Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSWDEC) have been establishing ways to incorporate Indigenous knowledges through the 'Quality Teaching Framework'. One project - designed through the Sydney Region's Aboriginal and Curriculum Consultant Teams, Bemel-Gardoo - provides a model for embedding Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge in curriculum content (Riley & Genner, 2011). The questions asked in this project were as follow. How do you embed Aboriginal Australian cross-curriculum content into units of work? How can you best engage school systems and Aboriginal community in the process? How can you facilitate team-teaching relationships, which strengthen Aboriginal cultural knowledge content? (p. 119)

These objectives are easily translated for the Higher Education sector; particularly as key areas of concern in using the 'Quality Teaching Framework' in Aboriginal education was in the 'Significance Dimension' with the elements of: Cultural Knowledge, Knowledge Integration, Inclusivity, Connectedness and Narrative. The issue being how to assist educators to create processes and links to ensure these elements are incorporated, while maintaining a clear focus on key concepts central to the element of Deep Knowledge in the Intellectual Quality Dimension. The challenge seemed to revolve around the tacit acceptance of Eurocentric content of curriculum and understandings of 'perspectives' as bolted-on rather than built-in. The purpose in the Bemel-Gardoo Project was to support staff to look at curriculum content from Aboriginal rather than Eurocentric perspectives and to *recognise* the value of Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge to the curriculum.

The aim therefore was to change the focus of educators in their perceptions of what and whose content were they actually teaching. That is, get them to critically reflect, on their own processes, by using four scenarios set out in the model (see Figure 1) to encourage educators to examine: (S1) Ethnocentric perspectives of Eurocentric content; (S2) Ethnocentric perspectives on Aboriginal content; (S3) Aboriginal perspectives on Ethnocentric content; and (S4) Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginal content.

Figure 1: Embedding Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge into Curriculum Content



Embedding Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge (Michael Genner, 2012, Slide 7)

Working alongside Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge Holders can assist educators in the process and ensure Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginal content are central.

Nakata (2007) notes that,

Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific ones are considered so disparate as to be “incommensurable” or “irreconcilable” on cosmology, epistemology and ontological grounds.Differences at this level mean that in the academic it is not possible to bring in Indigenous knowledge and plonk it in the curriculum unproblematically as if it is another data set for Western knowledge to discipline and test. Indigenous knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems work off different theories of knowledge that frame who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence, and related issues. ... we cannot just “do” Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. (p. 8)

Nakata (2007), goes on to say that what has occurred in the academia is that through Non-Indigenous discourse there has developed an approach of knowing “about” Aboriginal knowledge, cultures and issues; rather than incorporation of Indigenous voices and grounding of Indigenous knowledges, cultures and issues in their own disciplines. We are working towards research that has equality for Indigenous peoples, which is often a challenge to the Western classifications developed to suit

Western hierarchies, linearity, abstraction and objectification of Indigenous knowledges, cultures and issues (Nakata, 2007, p. 9). (See also: Williamson & Dalal, 2007).

Arguably, this can be achieved via pedagogical teaching and curriculum content that: embeds cultural knowledge as provided by appropriate Cultural Knowledge Holders; recognises and understands the complexities within 'Cultural Interface' (Nakata, 2007) – the connection and differences between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous worlds and knowledge economies; prioritises Indigenous voices and epistemologies (Minniecon, Franks & Heffernan, 2007) with recognition of the diversity of cultural knowledges; builds in Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Knowledge Rights of the Cultural Knowledge Holders; and increases critical reflection capabilities of academics in teaching programs.

A primary process for provision of these goals is through engagement with Aboriginal educators, researchers, and local communities. To convey Aboriginal knowledge to Non-Aboriginal students would be invalid without the contributions of Aboriginal people through their 'translation' of their experiences into the new context (Ramsey & Walker, 2010). In particular, we need to reverse the present "*systemic undervaluing of local knowledge and Aboriginal culture, a deeply ingrained unwillingness to 'see' more sophisticated Aboriginal knowledge and processes*" (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 105). Battiste (2002) argues that integrating the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people into mainstream education creates a balanced centre from which to analyse European culture and learning.

The embedding of Aboriginal understandings through their narratives will assist non-Aboriginal academics teaching Indigenous content as part of mainstream curriculum, to incorporate both Aboriginal Standpoint Pedagogy (Nakata, 2007) and Aboriginal voices into their teaching (Phillips & Whatman, 2007).

The Context of Aboriginal Community Engagement in Research

Research involving any Indigenous Australians must always have in-built ethical behaviours and practices (NHMRC, 2003). Unfortunately research has often been blinded by a researcher's differing sets of values, perspectives and non-recognition of Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge's and protocols. It is this non-recognition which can create harm both subtle and obvious which leaves Indigenous people feeling they have been dismissed and under-valued (NHMRC, 2003). Researchers must ask questions such as:

- How will the research impact to assist in making changes in Aboriginal lives either personally or indirectly through changes in service provision for their families and communities? and
- How will the research empower the community?

Indigenous peoples do not value research that simply advances the credentials of the researcher (Minniecon, Franks & Heffernan, 2007) to them this is a one-way flow of knowledge and accreditation of that knowledge. The question they want answered is: How does the research or our involvement in the research benefit individuals and their communities? (NHMRC, 2005). Skilbeck notes the following obligations in regard to higher education institutions and researchers:

Higher education is challenged to continue advancing the equity cause, not just as an add on but as an integral element in its broader intellectual, cultural, social and economic purposes ... Higher education has a key role in advancing the values of justice, democratic life and their wider dissemination in society. This is not a separate, free standing, theoretically disposable role, but a central or core value, part of the enduring concept of education as a universal enlightenment, civic development and personal fulfilment. (Skilbeck, 2000, p. i)

When assessing the historical stances and policies which have affected Indigenous Australians over the last two centuries, we need to acknowledge the role education has played in the colonising

process. It is hard to determine whether it was the ethnocentric views which lead the research or whether it was the ethnocentric research which lead the policies and practices which have governed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives since colonisation.

The colonising approach in undertaking research concerning Indigenous people has often been about objectifying (Sherwood, Keech, Keenan & Kelly, 2011) and treating them as subjects on whom the research will be undertaken. As subjects they are observed, assessed and quantified through the cultural and often gender lens of the researcher. Despite prolific writing now available to Non-Indigenous researchers about Indigenous methodologies and Indigenous principles for engaging in research with Indigenous communities, objectifying and colonising mentalities in research still prevail (Minniecon, Franks & Heffernan, 2007; Sherwood, Keech, Keenan & Kelly, 2011). As an example, two of the authors recently encountered a proposed project involving short visits into traditional communities, sending HDR Aboriginal students out to gather information - including photos of secret/sacred sites - for this researcher to interpret. When asked which Aboriginal communities were contacted and where the Aboriginal engagement was; the academic's response was that it was not required.

Why use this proposal as an example? Because it is a perfect example of an ongoing colonial approach in research – indicating where the control of the research rests and that Aboriginal people and their culture are seen as objects that have no say in the research. It is also very much a 'them' approach, rather than an 'us' approach with Indigenous people. This type of research in effect seeks to omit, exclude and misrepresents Indigenous people's knowledge, cultures and issues (Nakata, 2007; Fredericks, 2007; Stewart, 2007).

Fredericks (2007) sees this as failure to interrogate a system that refuses to speak to Indigenous peoples, that speaks 'about' and not with Indigenous peoples. This omission Fredericks (2007) asserts, leaves Aboriginal people voiceless, remaining on the periphery as "*objects*" whilst reinforcing the "*legitimacy*" and "*authority*" of the Non-Indigenous researchers as "*Cultural Overseers*" and the "*Privileged Interpreters*" of Aboriginal people (p. 17). Rather what should be taking place is the creation of research that emancipates and liberates Indigenous people. Through challenging colonialist research and attitudes, we can build openness; and in the process de-colonise both the researchers and information held 'about' Aboriginal people (Sherwood, Keech, Keenan & Kelly, 2011; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007).

The non-inclusive research creates grave concerns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Minniecon, Franks & Heffernan, 2007) as well as Non-Indigenous researchers who have striven to create equity within the research field and to ensure that the outcomes benefit Aboriginal people. The core principles for research involving Aboriginal people are that it "*respects our shared values; is relevant to our priorities, needs and aspirations; and, develops long term ethical relationships with researchers, institutions and sponsors*" (NHMRC, 2005, p. 1). Importantly, as stated in the NHMRC (2005) 'Keeping on Track', "*regardless of who comes up with the research idea or who does the research, it is important to think about whether or not the research is right (ethical and appropriate) for our communities/organisations*" (NHMRC, 2005, p. 15).

Kinship On-Line Project Aboriginal Community Engagement – The Process Undertaken

Aboriginal community engagement is a critical aspect of the Kinship On-Line Project. What follows is a discussion of the role that Aboriginal Kinship connections and Country played in determining which Aboriginal community we engaged with; and how this added to the credibility and validity of the research. We then discuss the protocols which need to be

followed for the Aboriginal researcher coming into an Off-Country community and any Non-Aboriginal researchers. We present a four stage Aboriginal community engagement model, which has been developed by Riley, for this Project and may assist other researchers engaging in research with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

In determining the location of which Aboriginal community should be approached to be invited into the project, the Team assessed:

- Which Aboriginal communities did people in the team have a history with? and
- Which Aboriginal communities might view the associated research and engagement as a positive for their community?

Dubbo was selected as the primary site for the project, due to the fact that one of the project team Riley has an extensive history, community connections and cultural validity in the Dubbo area:

1. Aboriginal Kinship Connections.
2. Validity in the following areas relating to the research:
 - As an Aboriginal person;
 - Educational - credentials and work experience in the area;
 - Credibility - trust has been established through being known and work standards valued;
 - Research - known and recognised.

Riley, being an Aboriginal person from that Country with strong connections in Aboriginal education in NSW, and as author of the 'Kinship Presentation' made first contact. The contact was informal to discuss the proposed project within the Dubbo community. The first step in validating the Project was to discuss the Project concept; the second step was to talk about the academics in the team and why they should be involved. These prior introductions were done so that when the local Aboriginal community got to physically meet the 'outside' or 'off-Country' people involved in the research, they don't come as strangers, the community already know who they are. In doing this we allow the local Aboriginal community time to develop a relationship. We are creating a history of these 'unknown' people for the local community. We are also following local Aboriginal community protocols in introducing 'off-Country' people into the community.

Then, these 'relationship connections' were followed up through more western processes and protocols, such as: phone calls, emails and letters of introduction – as per the ethics approval process for the research; and then formal personal introductions by the 'known' person, to Aboriginal community members.

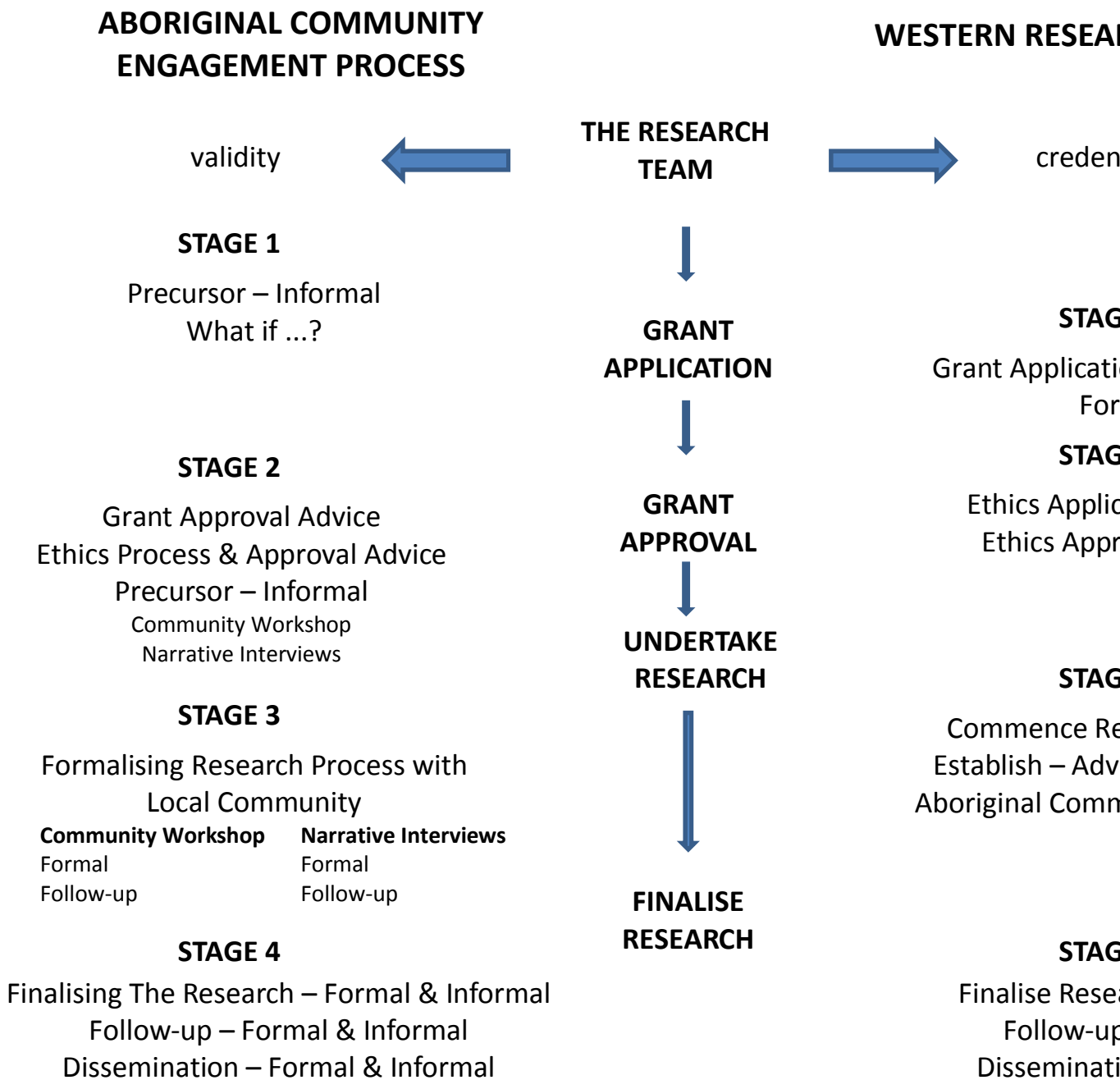
Kinship On-Line Project – Aboriginal Community Engagement Model

In determining the application for the 'Kinship On-line Project' and the extent of the community engagement, a number of stages were required to make sure this was an effective process.

The Aboriginal Community Engagement Model (see Figure 2) is a breakdown of the engagement processes followed in the 'Kinship On-line Project' - the flow chart provides an indicative timeframe for each stages commencement - and how this aligns with the Western Research Process, as used in the 'Ethics Application and Approval' processes. In practice both approaches must be in tandem for the research to be effective. As Fredericks (2007) and Minniecon, Franks & Heffernan (2007) espouse

that Indigenous research must be competent in Western research methodologies and Indigenous scholarship and protocols, otherwise we may in effect be assisting in perpetuating colonisation, untruths, bias, ethnocentric views and racism.

Figure 2: Aboriginal Community Engagement Model



Aboriginal Community Engagement Model (© Lynette Riley, 2013)

This model shows how research in the Indigenous field can be more critical and reflective (Sherwood, Keech, Keenan & Kelly, 2011) and allows longer timeframes to ensure full engagement with Aboriginal people. This is to guarantee appropriate research is undertaken with the consent of Aboriginal community and for benefit of the community involved.

Aboriginal Community Engagement Process within the Kinship On-Line Project

The following articulates various stages and actions undertaken in the model above.

Stage 1 – Precursor and What If?

Stage 1 – Precursor – Informal

The informal process needs:

- To commence at least 6-12 months prior to any grant application.
- To be undertaken with local organisers & participants.
- To be undertaken with potential research assistants.
- Venues to be assessed for future meetings and workshops.
- Aboriginal community validation of researchers.

Aboriginal community engagement from an Aboriginal standpoint means as Parsons (2008) states “We are all stakeholders now”. Engaging Aboriginal stakeholders in the development and design of a Project can be a lengthy process and it should start about 6-12 months prior to the grant application. For example, the first step in considering the possibility of developing the face-to-face workshop into an on-line teaching tool was to consider which Aboriginal stakeholders needed to be consulted. Additionally validation of the researchers through local Aboriginal community protocols is imperative.

Stage 1 – What If?

Research ideas as questions need to be presented to members of the local Aboriginal community people and organisations and their feedback needs to be incorporated in the grant application:

“What if we were to submit a proposal for a grant to do?”

“Would you think this is a good idea?”

“Would you be supportive of the research?”

“In what way could you be supportive?”

“Where could we hold workshops?”

“Who do you think could/should be involved in organising events/components for this research in ...?”

“Who should be invited to participate in the workshops for the research?”

“If we apply for the grant, and if and when the ethics process is cleared does anyone want to be contacted further about the research?”

In undertaking the ‘Precursor’ and ‘What if?’ phase of this Project, Riley informally spoke to:

- Aboriginal people working in the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, including: Schools, Aboriginal Consultants & Liaison Officers, and the Regional Director from the Dubbo region.
- Aboriginal people working in the Western Institute of Technology – TAFE College, Aboriginal Development Manager, Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Regional Director.
- Members of the Dubbo Aboriginal community, including Language & Cultural Teacher, Elders Groups, Aboriginal organisations, such as pre-schools and staff in Lands Council, etc.
- Other members of the local Aboriginal community and wider region working in what is referred to as the Aboriginal Public Service Sector – who had attended the Kinship Presentation in previous workshops in Dubbo and across the Western Region, which included Kooris working in health, legal professions, and housing sectors.

State-wide Consultation – was also needed as our proposal related to Aboriginal education, several consultative meetings were held with the President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Community Consultative Group (NSWAECG) to present the rationale for the Project. We were then given a time-slot on the agenda at a State Meeting of the NSWAECG to gain advice from and support of the members.

Stage 2 – Informal and Formal Notification

Stage 2 – Informal & Formal Notification

Local Aboriginal Community Organisers must be seen as valid and be seen as:

- Neutral within the Aboriginal community.
- Be able to speak across a wide cross-section of the community.
- Have access to resources to assist in the research project.

Stage 2, occurred after formal notification of the grant approval and ethics approval and prior to entering the field to conduct the research. This involved building research relationships and formalising the involvement of the community in the research. As a precursor to conducting the workshops and interviews, we talked with community members about who should be interviewed and negotiated with Public Sector Managers to gain approval for the involvement of their Aboriginal staff as organisers and participants in the project. Once approval was granted for Aboriginal staff to be formally engaged in the research as workshop organisers and interviewers and prior to conducting the workshop and collecting narratives, a research training session for organisers/interviewers was held. The training covered: what the research ethics process is; why the research is being run the way it is; importance of a wide group of participants and why; and their role in the process.

We then formalised plans for the community workshop: the venue; how the workshop would work; role of organisers and role of participants; the workshop program and timing; and who would present what sections of the program; as well as catering. Throughout this process we were mindful of building the local communities capacities in undertaking formal research and provided additional time for discussions so that they felt comfortable in understanding research and ethics processes involved.

Stage 3 – Formalising the Process with the Local Community

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Meetings with Dubbo Aboriginal Community Organisers:

1. Community Workshop

Formal – Research Ethics Process

Before organising the Community Workshop

- Provision of information sheets as per ethics process; talk with individuals and organisations on their involvement and walk them through the research project and ascertain their expectations and objectives of the research.

2. Interviewing Process – Narrative Collection

Formal – Research Ethics process

Before organising the Narrative Interviews

- Discuss the narrative collection process with local community interviewers and cover issues such as: Ethics implications; identification of potential participants and information needed to be collected from participants; type of information sought and types of questions to ask participants in narrative collection process.

Stage 4 – Formalising the Process with the Local Community

Stage 4 – Formalising the Process with the Local Community

At the stage of writing this paper these stages are yet to be finalised, they include:

1. Finalising the Research – Formal & Informal

- Continuous phone and email contact regarding interview progress – being careful to not be seen as harassing interviewers, but rather to be seen as keeping the process on track.
- A follow-up visit from the team for feed-back on the interview process and completion.
- Collect evaluation and provide reports in suitable language.

2. Follow-up – Formal & Informal

- A survey of the interviewers on the narrative collection process.

3. Dissemination – Formal & Informal

- Visit the community and debrief how they thought the project went and ideas for improving future projects.
- Provision of verbal report followed by the formal written report – may need to be in plain English for the community.
- Community Workshop to demonstrate web-site and gather comments.
- Provisions of details on how people can collect and submit future narratives or get assistance to record their stories.

Western Research - Aboriginal Community Engagement

There is a very logical reason for the formal approaches undertaken in the Western Research model, which has a 'one size', fits all approaches, to cater for diverse faculty approaches in research. This incorporates: Grant Application and Ethics Approval Process with an Aboriginal Community Engagement process. A key concern with the Western model is that the researchers must have appropriate credentials to carry out research, or be registered as studying for these credentials. For example, a Masters or Doctorate degree; this often does not equate with experience in working with Aboriginal communities and does not incorporate the Aboriginal validity process of researchers required by Aboriginal communities. This can create problems for Aboriginal people, as a researcher who may have the academic credentials, may not be culturally competent, ie: have the skills or knowledge in working with Aboriginal communities; which could and sometimes creates serious communication and cultural conflict. If this approach is not challenged it may mean that Aboriginal communities have a 'bad' experience or could be 'harmed in some way' and not wish to be engaged in future research projects, thus creating difficulties into the future.

Additionally while there is often a requirement – within the ethics process – for the researcher to demonstrate that they have made contact with representatives of an Aboriginal organisation

(‘gatekeeper’) and that these representatives provide, in principle support for the research, the extent to which requirements are imposed on the researcher or the participants is limited. Such as, avoidance of coercion in organisations or of individuals so that participants retain choice of whether or not they participate in the research; to ensure that the researcher remains at ‘arms-length’ from the research participants; and is neutral with the people they are researching; has been built into research ethics programs over time to protect those people being researched. The idea that the participants would be involved in the research questionnaire is also at odds with not pre-empting responses and allowing themes and theories to emerge freely from the research participants.

Although ethics committees have been established to ensure that participants involved in research are protected, there is no flexibility within the process of engaging with different Aboriginal communities, Nations or Clan groups and the respective protocols for each; or for different types of research. For example, the requirement of many Australian ethics committees to have a representative from an Aboriginal organisation or one Aboriginal organisation overseeing the research can be highly problematic and can result in conflict within a community and hinder the research process. It can inevitably leave the inexperienced researchers becoming embroiled in community politics that can possibly lead to doomed research because they are shut out from a community; or produce research that is not truly representative of the locality involved in the study.

Knowledgeable and experienced Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal researchers can navigate their way around such limitations in the context of the locality and Aboriginal peoples and organisations due to their understanding and engagement with Aboriginal protocols. Yet, in doing so, they can become embroiled in lengthy ethics clearance processes going back and forward with written responses to ethics committee’s with little or no experience with Aboriginal people or Indigenous research. This process can also stall the research, and create tensions when Aboriginal community protocols have been followed and the Aboriginal community is left asking why isn’t the research taking place, they will state ‘you’ve asked us about the research but now nothing is happening’. Both protocols systems can create havoc for the unexperienced Aboriginal community and researchers.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to discuss community engagement for the Kinship On-Line Project in the context of Indigenous methodological, epistemological and ethical considerations by juxtaposing Indigenous and Western ways of teaching and research and exploring in greater detail the differences between them.

The paper discusses the importance of embedding Aboriginal knowledges into the curriculum. It shows how the pilot Kinship On-Line Project uses a current cross-cultural education program incorporating Aboriginal community peoples’ narratives which have been collected and embedded into the on-line program. This Project will provide additional teaching for university students to enable them to gain Aboriginal information first hand from these narratives. The paper explores the validation of this Project from an Aboriginal standpoint, of Aboriginal engagement. It then discusses the ethical considerations of Aboriginal engagement in the context of Western research processes and provided a model with a comparison between our Aboriginal community approach and an exemplar Western research process.

This paper extends our thinking on the interaction between cultural groups to ensure all stakeholders in the research feel valued and in control of their engagement within the research. It is not an easy

process, but with respect and cultural competence by researchers the process adds enormous value not only to the research, but also to delivery of appropriate outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

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