

On Country – Off Country: Web Based Engagement with Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

Australia's first nation people have suffered deep loss stemming from the colonisation of their lands and restrictions on cultural practises. Despite endemic disadvantage, many people maintain profound connections to traditional lands, their *country*, and retain a desire to share their cultural knowledge. This presents opportunities for design academics and tertiary students to establish partnerships with indigenous communities. This paper casts a reflective lens over an architecturally focused case study with a remotely located indigenous Australian community to differentiate learning outcomes that are site based *on country* and those conducted in classrooms *off country*. In the pre-COVID era, the Bower Studio program within the Melbourne School of Design at the University of Melbourne was taught with both on and off country learning opportunities. Bower Studio coordinates small groups of students travelling on country to meet community members in remote Australian communities and facilitates indigenous elders travelling to attend classes in Melbourne. While this combination was accepted as best-practise, the suspension of in-person gatherings due to COVID threatened the integrity of this program and forced significant change. Reliant upon video conferencing it would be reasonable to expect that the loss of on country experiences would significantly hamper the student/community engagement whilst simultaneously diminishing academic outcomes. This research reflects upon the project to confirm that on country learning remains best practise, however there were unexpected benefits from off country engagements facilitated through video conferencing.

Keywords

indigenous design, on country learning, video conferencing, architecture pedagogy, bower Studio

Introduction

In response to the Covid 19 pandemic the Australian State and Territory Governments instigated a strict 'stay at home' edict beginning in late March 2020 restricting travel for all but essential needs. As the health threats increased the teaching program at the University of Melbourne was suspended from the third week of semester to reconvene one-week later with video conferencing technologies used as the primary tool for interaction. The university required all content to be delivered via Zoom with academics redesigning their delivery modes and course structure. In many subjects this redesign was straightforward as online lectures were commonplace. However, studio-based subjects, such as the architecture program analysed in this research, required a significant shift in the program structure as well as delivery methods.

Many teachers claim video conferencing is problematic with many students losing their 'voice' with this format. Research shows that educators find it hard to initiate, facilitate and maintain group discussions, particularly when students can 'opt out' and minimise participation by turning off their sound and camera (Cox, 2011; Lederman, 2020; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Reading students' body language becomes more difficult and the informal sketches, drawings and models that form an integral product of small group face-to-face engagements are inhibited when undertaken via Zoom screen sharing. It was anticipated that these difficulties might become especially apparent when video conferencing was undertaken across cultures.

Complicating matters further, the introduction of travel restrictions compounded the program's redesign by eliminating possibilities to take students to visit the partner community in remote Northern Territory. Visits to tribal lands provide opportunities for 'on-country' learning as differentiated from the learning in the classroom and 'off country'. In the case study discussed here, travel restrictions removed the chance for indigenous community members to visit Melbourne as well as students spending two weeks embedded within the remote community.

As the program's designer and coordinator, the author was acutely aware that the integrity of the program was at risk. Students expected face-to-face teaching and the opportunity to visit and learn with indigenous leaders. More than thirteen-years' experience teaching this type of program has shown that the time embedded within the community would have profoundly shaped the student experience and their subsequent design outputs. During 2020, in week three of a twelve-week semester, these expectations were shattered by the inability to travel on country. In addition to the loss of face-to-face learning, the loss of direct contact to country and people posed significant pedagogical concerns and carried significant implications for the studio's academic outputs.

The importance of on country learning for indigenous leaders in Australia cannot be underestimated. When on country students absorb a range of narratives and landscapes that are impossible to recreate in a classroom setting. The profound connections significant numbers of indigenous Australians have to their land are difficult to comprehend – without on country experience this link becomes manifestly difficult to understand and impossible to bridge. This paper discusses an architecturally focused case study to identify how this move to off country learning was managed and identifies ways that the student experience was diminished. It goes on to ask if there were any 'silver linings' to the program design that might enhance the design of future projects. After detailing the systems used to address this loss, the paper asks if video conferencing technologies can play a useful role during consultation processes involving indigenous and non-indigenous people and demonstrate the value of engagements undertaken off country.

What is 'On Country' Learning All About?

Indigenous Australians have sustained contact with their land for over 65,000 years with their connection to *country* defining their very being (Langton, 2018). Within the Australian context the colonial disregard of indigenous knowledge systems was widespread and governed attempts to erase indigenous culture (Perkins et al., 2008). Indigenous people were forced from their traditional lands and family structures dismantled during this brutal act of colonization.

Over successive generations much of the intimate knowledge about the seasonal changes in the land, including rainfall, flood and fire risks, soil type, food production, bush medicine, flora and fauna, has been lost. Without adequate knowledge of these interlinked factors the sustainability of the Australian landscape has subsequently been degraded. More recently, the importance of this deep understanding and connection to country has been recognized with university programs funded specially to link indigenous knowledge with cutting edge research. As one example among many, the expertise within the indigenous community has caused a significant shift in contemporary land management systems in Australia. This now encompasses indigenous knowledge systems to mitigate environmental risks such as wildfire, the effects of drought and land degradation.

Collaborative research involving both indigenous and non-indigenous people has almost exclusively been undertaken on country – the lands that are the subject of the particular research/learning projects. Indigenous Australian researchers speak of the importance of on country learning: “our consciousness originated on country so learning on country is a consciousness enhancing program that we teach all peoples” (Moran et al., 2018). While many indigenous elders want to share knowledge more widely and embrace opportunities to work with tertiary students, both domestically and internationally, there are significant challenges that must be overcome for this learning to take place. Within this Australian context, the sharing of indigenous knowledge is an acutely challenging activity underscored by complex cultural protocols. The structures that govern indigenous knowledge, its ownership, ways it can be told and places it can be told are exceptionally intricate with both formal and informal rules that non-indigenous people find difficult to comprehend. Specific stories and places can be shared with non-indigenous people, while others remain exclusively linked to specific tribal groupings and can only be told in specific physical settings. Adding to these challenges, the coordinators of teaching programs in Australia must address the difficulty in physically and conceptually linking students to these, often remote, locations whilst also addressing logistical concerns such as the complex travel required, lack of appropriate accommodation in remote locations and climate concerns associated with the extended wet season and extreme heat.

Despite the potential for video technologies to aid connections between on country indigenous teachers and off country learners based at universities, research examining this type of relationship is uncommon. One of the rare case studies to emerge was the Teaching from Country program initiated in 2009 at Charles Darwin University linking indigenous elders from the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia with university students located on campus at universities in Australia and California. Reflecting on these discussions and experiences, facilitated through video screens and transmitted via satellite, the researchers described the ensuing confusions and collective frustrations that accompanied the unstable connections and technological complexities noting that the successes of the program was to be measured more by the shared experiences and nurturing relationships rather than the detailed planning and subject management (Christie et al., 2010).

On Country at Kalkaringi

The Bower Studio is a university-based design/build program with an extensive history working with indigenous communities in Australia and Papua New Guinea. In 2020 the program was to be managed in conjunction with the Gurindji Aboriginal Corporation responsible for indigenous

welfare at the Kalkaringi community in remote Northern Australia. The collective team was preparing an intensive program in April/May 2020 to refurbish an old clinic building and reconfigure it to become the new community centre.

This community's involvement in this program must be understood in the context of their own story and their own country. The Kalkaringi settlement is in a remote region of Australia's Northern Territory 800km from the capital city Darwin. It houses people from key tribal groups, Gurindji, Warlpiri and Mudburra, famous for playing a leading role in the fight for indigenous equality and land rights over country stolen by white colonists at the end of the 19th century. In 1966 the indigenous workers at the Wave Hill Cattle Station rebelled against the white station owners during the 'Wave Hill Walk-off', a strike lasting eight years that precipitated the indigenous land rights movement in Australia. The striking workers and families won the support of trade unions, university students, the Communist Party of Australia and later, the general public (Ward, 2016). In 1975 Gough Whitlam, as Australian Prime Minister, returned a portion of the land to the Gurindji in a landmark case of the repatriation of stolen country to indigenous control. This event, the first such 'land handback' is celebrated at the Kalkaringi and Daguragu communities in August every year during the 'Freedom Day' festival.

The University of Melbourne has a long partnership with the Kalkaringi settlement beginning in May 1970 when architecture lecturer Stan Barker arrived with a small team of supporters that included political agitator Frank Hardy, two tradesmen and architecture students. After hearing community elders voice their needs and aspirations the team began discussing housing made from local earth and thatch with work beginning almost immediately on housing prototypes (Ward, 2016). The relationship was rekindled in 2014 when architecture lecturers David O'Brien and James Neil were invited to meet Gurindji, Warlpiri and Mudburra elders at the site of the 1966 Walk-off. Whilst out on country, the elders asked for help creating a place to honour the leaders of the Walk-off and assistance providing opportunities to share this history with the broader public.¹ Fully aware of the tumultuous history of non-indigenous architects working in indigenous communities the pair decided to use the University of Melbourne's Bower Studio program to embark on a longer-term journey assisting the community meet their broader goals. There are valid reasons for this incremental approach as there are many examples throughout Australia where the outcomes of indigenous and non-indigenous partnerships have not been well conceived following valid criticisms that the indigenous 'voice' was not well heard or valued.

Bower Philosophy

The University of Melbourne's Bower Studio addresses the importance of projects being indigenous led by working modestly, under-promising and over-delivering and taking the time to listen and process the indigenous voice. Consultations are seen as a two-way engagement with cultural learnings and engagements from all participants. Evidence shows that it is important that this activity happens on country on the lands inhabited by indigenous people. Similarly, it is important where possible, for this engagement to work both ways with indigenous members also learning on the country inhabited by the student team. In this case it

¹ You can find out more here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQdfXIWdrFQ>

was proposed that a delegation of Kalkaringi community members would also visit Melbourne to lay the groundwork for later conversations on country.

It is important to note that the Bower Studio program is based on a different premise to the typical 'design/build' model used by universities worldwide. Instead, a more complex dynamic has been introduced where, from the students' own perspective, the building and consulting phases of a program are undertaken simultaneously before the students go on and prepare their own design ideas (O'Brien et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2018). By disrupting the traditional design/build model the sequence ensures a better outcome where the students' designs are informed by a deeper understanding over the complex web of aspirations, capabilities, cultures, programs and budgets that define community development projects.

While keeping the community's key aspirations in mind, particularly the design and construction of the proposed multi-million-dollar Gurindji Heritage Centre, it was agreed to take a step by step approach to build deeper relationships within a flexible program, time frame and budget. Without a secured source of dedicated funding, the expectations that the facility would be operational in a short time frame were realistically low. Stemming from the 2014 discussions, Bower Studio has recognised this and helped develop a series of 'entrée' projects in conjunction with local community groups and work teams. These projects have included the three pavilions that mark the 'Wave Hill Walk-off Trail' (2016), extensions to the Karungkarni Arts Centre (2018), three bough sheds (2018/19) and designs for the sports facilities in Libanangu Park. The pre-Covid19 schedule had also planned that the 2020 Bower Studio team would assist the Gurindji Aboriginal Corporation design and build shade structures and landscaping to the Kalkaringi Community Centre during its refurbishment phase. This plan was to include a Bower Studio team of three staff and twelve students working alongside a local work team on country for twelve days in April/May 2020.

Working on country is arguably the key learning experience for the architecture school's team. Embedded with the community at Kalkaringi, students would have a chance to engage with the elders, hear their stories and aspirations, and engage with the ways people use and appreciate space on country. For this to work equitably, it is important to reciprocate on country learning experiences to include visiting delegations of indigenous community leaders coming to Melbourne. Prior to the program at Kalkaringi a delegation of three Karungkarni Arts representatives was scheduled to come to the university to meet the Bower Studio team and visit cultural sites in Melbourne. An ambition for this component was to provide a basis on which the indigenous representatives could visit, see and feel their way through key cultural sites in Melbourne, effectively being on country in unfamiliar urban places. It was anticipated that this would help foster a shared language and connection between the indigenous and non-indigenous partners to facilitate deeper conversations around precedent, the occupation of space and imagery, and their connectivity with future design outcomes.

Program Restructure

The schedule to include components of on country learning was abandoned in April 2020 as the Covid19 pandemic closed state borders and stay at home orders were issued. The timing was unfortunate – just two weeks before the Kalkaringi teams' arrival in Melbourne and three

weeks before the university team’s arrival in Kalkaringi.² Despite our requirement to cancel the program’s on country phase the three main consultation groups in Kalkaringi; the Gurindji Aboriginal Corporation, Karungkarni Arts and the Warnkurr Social Club, were each well invested in the outputs of the program and were keen to proceed with video conferencing. The students were grouped into four and partnered with one of the three groups. The Gurindji Aboriginal Corporation led discussions on the proposed new community family centre, Karungkarni Arts focused on the culture/heritage centre program and the Warnkurr Social Club drove discussions on renovations to the club. While two of these projects (club and family centre) have pre-existing funding commitments, the culture/heritage project is significantly more costly and remains unfunded. Students traditionally have a choice of which project to pursue, however in this restructure the academics allocated students to groups to maintain momentum and build a degree of certainty in difficult times.

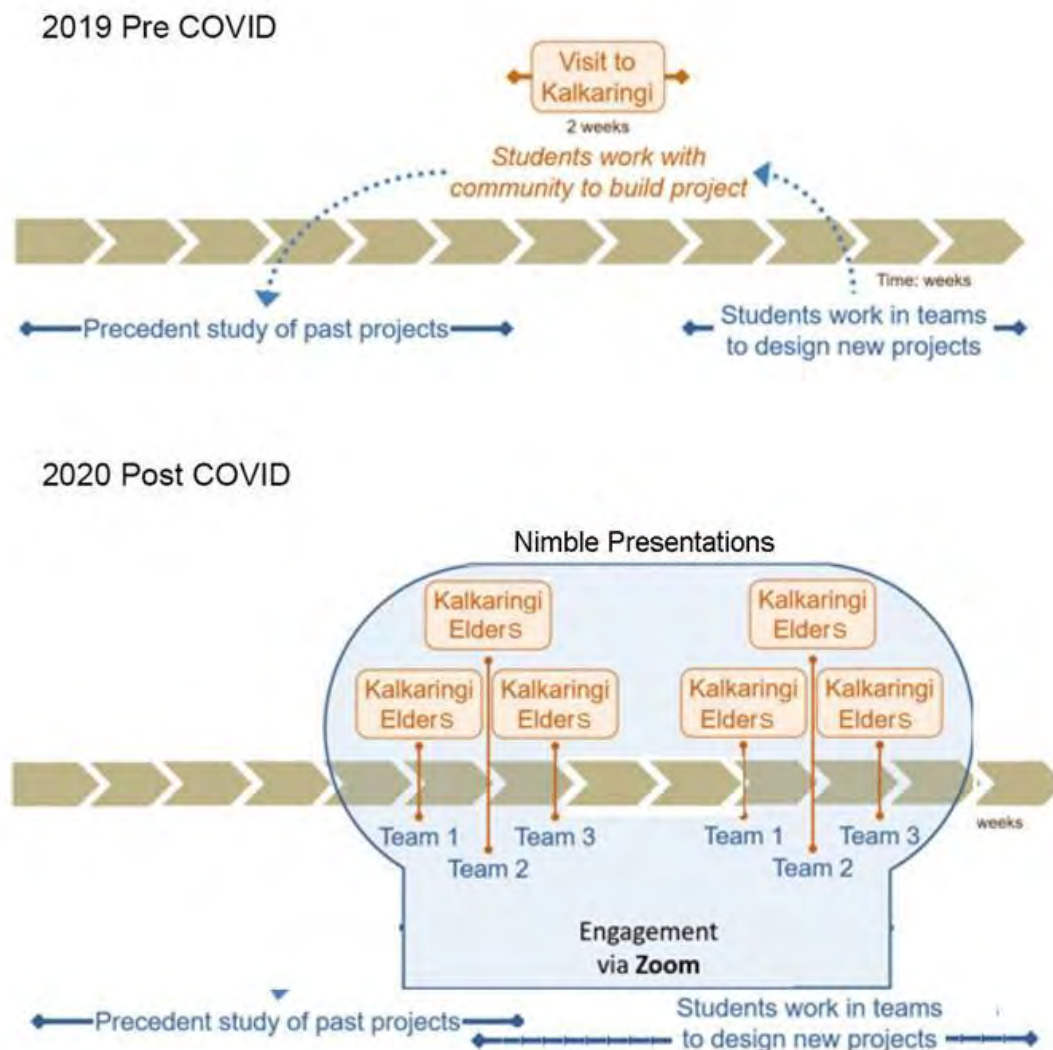


Figure 1. Diagram of program structures pre and post COVID

² This component of the program was postponed to July 2021.

The Bower Studio leaders were anxious that the lack of on country learning experiences, impacting both the Kalkaringi and Melbourne delegations, would be a significant loss to the program's integrity. While this was indeed problematic, each of the three consultation groups made a particular effort to use the video conferencing technologies to connect and work to create design outcomes.³ Video conferencing sessions were held weekly with each community group. Each student, working in groups of four, was assigned to a specific project (family centre, culture/heritage centre or social club) to produce sketch designs.⁴ Each group was supported by community mentors with specific interest in that project. Bower Studio academics acted as facilitators in these conversations with the structure of each session modified to suit the overarching program. Initial conversations were focused around broader community needs and the selected site, followed by sessions developing specific client briefs and discussions around the student's research on the precedents for each project. This led to weekly sessions where each group of students presented their own design ideas so they could then be refined in consultation with the indigenous clients and academics. In conjunction with these weekly sessions, academics provided additional three-hour sessions with students to reflect upon the virtual on country sessions.

The screen sharing options offered in Zoom video conferencing encourage a specific type of narrative that folds around sequential images delivered in a tightly controlled manner. This is a useful process when students present final designs for critique. However, as the following sections outline, this step by step process posed a challenge for the fluid and dynamic discussions that have traditionally facilitated the most useful design and consultation sessions.

Misalignments and Losses

It would be possible, at great length, to detail the combined losses to the program associated with the inability for Kalkaringi representatives to visit Melbourne as well as the architecture students travelling on country. At the most basic level, addressing the associated technical complexities to engage via video conferencing provided many challenges including the (un)reliability of the technologies and difficulties aligning meeting schedules. This required a level of organisation and technical proficiency that was not typically negotiated in the relationship between the university and community.

Perhaps most importantly, the inability of the 2020 cohort of architecture students to personally visit the Kalkaringi community left them with a vastly diminished understanding of the links indigenous people have with their lands. Previous staff and student cohorts have developed an appreciation of the ways on country experience adds to their education. Knowledge emerges in many forms and is, for example, supplemented by personal experiences such as camping in tents and cooking meals together on open fires. Campsites change location after two or three nights as the group explore the countryside and follow narratives that encompass concepts of time and place. Enveloping this tactile learning environment is the

³ Special thanks to Rob Roy, Quitaysha Thompson, Leah Leaman, Lisa Smiler, Michael Fairweather, Penny Smith and Phil Smith.

⁴ These can be seen at <https://bowerstudio.msd.unimelb.edu.au/projects/2020-kalkaringi-nt>

metaphysical presence and storytelling by indigenous elders that creates a profound impact on the team. Less formal opportunities include time at the social club, sharing a beer and a yarn after a day's labour. Working alongside the community has traditionally provided further opportunities for students to engage in conversations in a dynamic and informal setting. The loss of this type of activity in 2020 was keenly noticed by the indigenous leaders as well as the academics. Students had heard of the importance of this from peers and were aware that their experience was not as rich as it might have been.

Attempts to ameliorate this loss for the 2020 student cohort was never an easy task for the community and academics. The most noticeable challenge was to negotiate the subtle misalignments between expectations – indigenous/non-indigenous, client/designer, digital native/digital newcomer. The community members were keen to have a voice in the design of the three programs (family centre, culture/heritage centre and social club) and were highly invested in the design outcomes. The students wished to have their design ideas shaped by community representatives in conferencing sessions. During 2020, the single largest challenge for the Bower Studio academics was identifying how this video conferencing tool might be manipulated to address some of these identified losses, while also ensuring a rigorous and enjoyable consultative process for all participants.

Unexpected Benefits with Video Conferencing

Creating a culturally safe space for video conferencing was crucially important if the 2020 Bower Studio program was to succeed over the remaining nine weeks of semester. Having established relationships with community members stretching back seven years and more than a dozen visits to Kalkaringi, the academics had a solid basis on which to work. The staff had begun a professional relationship with the students and were dedicated to providing the best learning experience possible. Facilitating a robust and respectful dialogue with both cohorts required academics to rethink their use of the video conferencing technology – particularly in the delivery of the narratives that accompany aspects of design analysis and critique. Weeks 4 to 12 of semester have traditionally been allocated for students to introduce and critique design projects, firstly by other architects before moving on to sharing their own narratives that conceptually underpin their design. This process has traditionally been highly curated and sequential with the audience, for the most part, taking a relatively passive role.

This technique lends itself to a linear process that diminishes the capacity for fluid and dynamic conversations and decision making. To counter the risks to this project associated with linear thinking and discussions, the academic staff placed an emphasis on what we now term 'nimble' presentations. The use of the word nimble is to highlight the need for the expanded types of flexibility required during consultations. In contrast to a 'static' model, the nimble must be choreographed in such a way as to ensure the voice of the client is celebrated rather than compromised. In its most simplified form, a nimble presentation can be responsive to the immediate conversations. This requires each student team to accept and pre-plan for a series of alternative narrative pathways. With sufficient preparation it is possible for students to pre-choreograph a range of alternate scenarios and have these on hand to play as required. Using the game of tennis as an analogy, the server is not always sure what their next shot will be before the ball is returned. It might be a forehand, backhand, lob or topspin. However, the possibilities for all of these shots have been anticipated, practiced and can be used, or not, as

required. Similarly, a card player may have several cards in their hand but selects the most strategic card to play depending on the circumstances. In a similar vein, the architecture students were asked to anticipate how the conversation with the client might unfold and how each question and response opens new doors (which in turn opens others). With limited time for client meetings the larger the catalogue of ideas the students have prepared for and are at hand, the more purposeful and satisfying the conversation. To help manage this process the academics had met with each student group prior to the community meeting to clarify opportunities to help facilitate discussions. In effect, each student group had prepared multiple narratives that could then be focused on the most relevant issues emerging during the community meetings. In many cases the ideas could be quickly abandoned leading to quite focused discussions around opportunities with greater potential. It was noticeable that the video conferencing meetings could, at specific times and purposes, work to add more significant focus to interactions that would be almost impossible to facilitate during on country sessions.

Conclusion

Despite the profound loss of on country learning opportunities in 2020, it is valuable to take a reflective lens to this particular modified architectural program in the wake of the reconfigurations required by COVID restrictions. While the required video conferencing formats diminished opportunities for a broader community input at Kalkaringi, key community representatives were able to focus the architecture student's attention towards the community's voices and aspirations. This focus did benefit the program as the video conferencing provided a timely platform for indigenous community representatives to develop a positive and useful rapport with the students. Risks that the community's voice would be diminished by this video conferencing process were real. However, they could be ameliorated by each of the small groups discussing and critiquing designs with a dedicated portion of the teaching program encouraging discussions where 'nimble' thinking and innovative presentation techniques facilitated open-ended discussions in ways that were, perhaps, more effective than the traditional linear narratives associated with video conferencing.

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