

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PAST

Learning / Country

Learning Through Country: Teachers Changing Things Around

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Gunbalanya is a bininj¹ community situated on the western side of the tidal East Alligator River, which separates Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land. Kunwinjku is the name used to describe the language and the people of this area. Kunwinjku began to displace the Mengerr, the original occupants of this area, about 150 years ago as they migrated slowly from the north, attracted by the buffalo camps in the early 1900s, and then by the supply of Western goods and services provided by the Church Missionary Society. Three culturally significant outliers, or sandstone hills – Arrguluk, Injalak and Nimbabirr – form a triangle around Gunbalanya. The surrounding landscape is predominantly black soil floodplains, which merge with tropical woodland stretching to the foot of the escarpment, which rises dramatically from the adjoining country. This is the beginning of the ‘stone country’, a vast sandstone plateau. Up here can be found dramatic and spectacular evidence that unequivocally attests to the timeless occupancy of this country. Up here are examples of rock art that date from the pre-estuarine period of 20,000 years ago, to the more recent images of macassan perahu and buffalo shooters.

My country is Kabulwarnamyo near Marlgaowo outstation. My father and my mother speak Dangbom, but now they speak Mayali, which is related to Kunwinjku. Balanda teachers should always get help from bininj teachers. Balanda teachers might not have any ideas about working with bininj children. They might not know the language, culture, customs and law. Teaching bininj kids is a lot of work but it does change things around when balanda and bininj teachers get working together as a team. (Hagar Bulliwana)

When I arrived at Gunbalanya, I began to think about the things I needed to do to get the course under way. However, my thoughts were constantly wandering into the spectacular landscape. It is here though, as I explored the escarpment, the floodplains and the river, both physically and cognitively, that I found rich metaphors for the work I was doing. (Jack Frawley)

1. Bininj, a Kunwinjku word, is used to refer to Aboriginal people, while *balanda* is used to refer to non-Aboriginal people. Balanda comes from the word ‘Hollander’ which was used by Macassan trepangers to refer to European people.

I speak Kunwinjku because that is the language spoken at Gunbalanya, but my real language is Maung, which is from my father and his father, from Manginpurru. When I finished school, I didn't have a job. I remember when Esther told me they needed a bininj teacher to work in the secondary area. I went home, but I didn't say, 'Alright, I'll think about it and let you know.' No. I didn't say a word. I just walked back home. I don't know where or how my family got the message of me working at the school. When I saw them, they gave me a smile. I said, 'Alright, I don't know what you mob are smiling at, but I'm going to take this job.' 'Kamak, kamak (good, good),' they said. I still remember what my old man told me, 'Son, you must take this job. I know it's gonna be hard for you because this is your first time. But the kids will need you. Not just kids, but teachers as well. Every individual teacher needs to work together and support one another to build a team for our children's future. Things will get easier, but I don't know when. If you focus on what you are going to do out there, I will keep supporting you no matter what.' (Brandon Garnarradj)

During 2000 and 2001, Batchelor Institute's School of Education Studies delivered a Certificate III in Indigenous Education Work to a group of bininj teachers who were employed at the Gunbalanya Community Education Centre [CEC]. From the beginning, there was a desire for a different approach to curriculum planning and delivery of a Vocational Education & Training [VET] course document in order to counteract the assessment-driven approach to course content, and the compartmentalised view of adult learning. Therefore, the document was treated holistically, which meant that curriculum planning took place around one 'big idea'. The 'big idea' involved bininj and balanda adult learners at Gunbalanya thinking, talking and writing about a philosophy on both ways education. The 'big idea' attempted to address three essential questions: What is both ways pedagogy? What do we as educators need to learn about both ways pedagogy? And, how can a both ways pedagogy influence the school curriculum?

Rather than seeing VET curriculum as fixed like the escarpment, I began to look on it as fluid like the river, characterised by whirlpools formed by the meeting of the floodwaters and the incoming tide. Whirlpools are bodies of water that spin in a circular motion, often around a central area drawing floating objects towards it. Whirlpools are also a good metaphor for program planning. (Jack Frawley)

The whirlpool design for program planning was characterised by the following integrated curriculum

key concepts: curriculum mapping; core applications; essential questions; expressive thought; assessment; and reflection. Whirlpools in rivers are caused by irregularities or deviations in the river's formation, especially in its foundation – the riverbed. Similarly, program planning was characterised by deviations from what should be highly regular – the course document and its lock-stepped curriculum.

At the curriculum mapping stage there was a search for a 'big idea' that would be the unifying theme of the semester's program. The 'big idea' came about by presenting the process to the teaching staff at Gunbalanya during a 'learning together' session. Bininj and balanda teachers identified a number of issues that soon took shape as the 'big idea'. During this process, bininj and balanda teachers contributed their ideas and thoughts on teaching.

I had thought strongly about being a teacher and talked to my grand-dad and my father. When I started working as an assistant teacher, I was really nervous because I am a quiet man. I remember when my father said to me, 'You don't need to be afraid or nervous. Just try to be a normal person. You sit, wait and listen. Things will be changing all the time. If you listen and watch carefully, you'll understand. You will see good things happen. Try hard all the time and don't give up. Education is very important.' So, I think we need to sit together as a group, both balanda and bininj, and encourage one another. Everyone has the right to be heard. (Brandon Garnarradj)

After the initial 'big idea' had been identified, the next step was to think about the core of the year's program, that is what bininj teachers should know and what they should be able to do. This step involved working through the course document, and identifying the modules that seemed to complement each other.

My many years of adult education has informed a philosophy of adult learning that I try to apply in most of my work with adults. The basic goals of adult education, for me, are to assist learners to be self-guided, self-reflective and rational; and to assist learners to establish communities of discourse in which these qualities are honoured and fostered. These goals are informed by some fundamental beliefs: adult education should find its source and purpose in the adult learner; adult learners are active rather than passive; a teacher of adults should be an advisor, guide and partner in the educational process rather than an authority and classroom director; and adult learning activities should be cultur-

ally and contextually relevant so that students are motivated to learn because of the relevance of what they are studying and experiencing. (Jack Frawley)

The next step in program planning was to ask a number of essential questions. This became not so much an exercise on content, but on ways in which these questions could promote certain attributes. Asking a number of questions about individual tasks, and also the semester's program, fostered these attributes. For example, how does the semester's program promote the attributes of lifelong learning; encourage collaboration; develop complex thinking; improve effective communication; and assist professional and personal growth? By using these attributes to inform program development, a deeper level of learning evolved.

Throughout the year's program, bininj teachers' were encouraged to express themselves in written English and Kunwinjku. Initially I found the bininj teachers were operating at a reasonable level of spoken language but were quite reluctant to participate in writing. When reflecting on this and other issues, I continued to think about the place in which I worked and lived. The landscape around Gunbalanya is breathtaking with stark contrasts of impenetrable escarpment and wide, open floodplains. Throughout the escarpment are numerous galleries of rock art, which, in total, are awe-inspiring because of their age and exceptional beauty. This, in a round about way, got me thinking about visual-spatial intelligence. According to Multiple Intelligence theory if you display this intelligence then you, in part, think in pictures. I decided that I would take this idea and develop it for the writing process. (Jack Frawley)

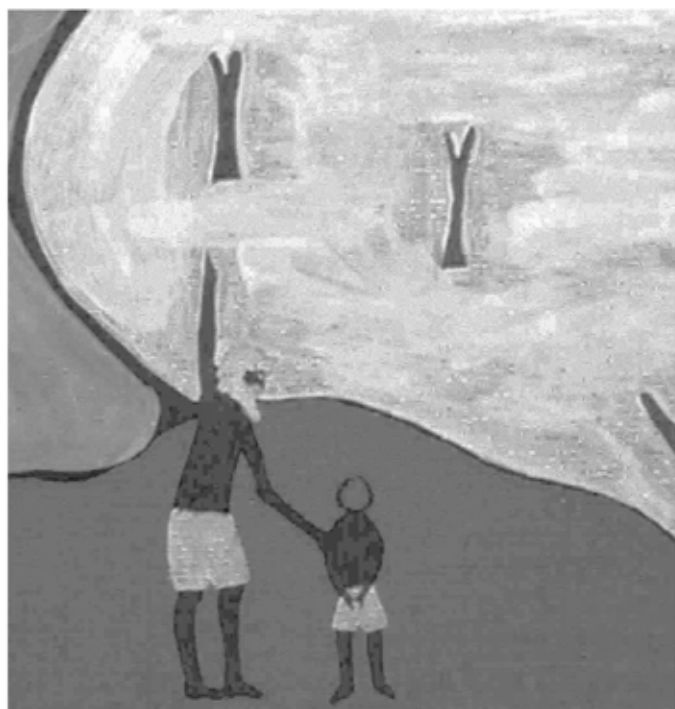
Expressive thought occurred as a multi-stage procedure. First, the 'big idea' was explored through listening to guest speakers, reading a short article, analysing posters and/or watching a video. This was followed by discussion in which bininj teachers developed their thoughts about the issue. They then visualised what they were thinking about by making art. Once they completed the art-making, they described it to other bininj teachers. They then wrote about it. For example, when thinking about 'both ways' the balanda Principal and the bininj Assistant Principal were invited to present their views on 'both ways'. Next the bininj teachers read a number of articles from a Batchelor journal *Ngoonjook* and from a publication called *Developing an Aboriginal Pedagogy*.

*Daniel and Esther came to the Batchelor Institute's study room and discussed with us both ways pedagogy. They talked with us and they wrote some points on the white board. They also drew a symbol. Daniel drew a symbol of fresh water and salt water mixing together. Esther drew a symbol as well, but it was different. She drew a symbol to show balancing both ways in bininj and balanda education. We discussed both ways pedagogy until we all agreed. After, we read a book call *Developing Aboriginal Pedagogy* that was written by Batchelor Institute Students in 1998. (Hagar Bulliwana)*

Bininj teachers discussed some of the ideas, completed the art-making and then presented it to the class. After this, the writing took place. Through this procedure the bininj teachers' attitude to writing changed quite substantially. Instead of being hesitant, a more creative and supportive approach to the written task became evident. This allowed time for bininj teachers to think about, or to get their story straight, before committing it to paper. Artists working from Gunbalanya's Injalak Art Centre, especially those working on significant pieces, go through a similar process.

We want our kids to learn in English and Kunwinjku so when they get older they may take our place. If we keep our community strong and keep it like that we can't lose. We need to encourage our children to come to school and develop their own interests. Education is a means of preparing people to survive. Bininj have survived because of education. They came with survival skills, knowledge, and understanding of the environment. They came in to find out how other people live. Balanda have survived because of education too. Balanda came with Western materials and goods. They built up schools to look after kids. Inside is to learn balanda ways. Now they are both coming in their own ways, but moving towards the centre where they meet. Bininj are still showing their knowledge to balanda, how to prepare theirs kids to survive. For balanda their knowledge is clear. It is like planting food in open ground or near open spaces. For bininj knowledge is clear too. It's like hunting out on the floodplains. So this knowledge has to come together in school. We want our children to learn how to survive in both cultures. (Hagar Bulliwana)

Artwork produced during these sessions ranged from visual representations of animals, to more complex and multi-layered compositions. By going through this process, bininj teachers had space to work the ideas and thoughts that were important to them.



This picture describes the knowledge of the bininj people before they go on to the Western world. Young kids must listen to their elders. The meaning of this picture is about an old man giving knowledge to his grandson. It is very important for the grandson to listen carefully and understand what his grand-dad is going to tell him. The old man is standing beside his grandson and pointing towards the school. There are two ways to pass through the knowledge to get to the top. You have bininj on one side and on the other side there is balanda. The old man is not just pointing but he's giving words 'kunmayali', which we call knowledge. The grandson must not forget the words given to him by his grand-dad. It is important to keep it in his mind. So when he goes out he won't be afraid. He will use all the skills given to him by his grand-dad. No matter what happens he just has to focus on his studying and never look back. He will have to help his teacher as well by bringing his knowledge to school and sharing it with his teacher. It is the same for bininj teachers working with balanda teachers. They share ideas. They work together and support the children and learn from each other. It doesn't matter if young and old work together because it is very important for education. That goes at home too. When he finishes school he will go back to his parents and help them when they go out hunting or gathering bush food.

It's the same for balanda but it's also a bit different. Bininj knowledge is a bit different to balanda knowledge. In bininj our knowledge and understanding are in ceremonies. Also yiwarrudj: we have two kinds of yiwarrudj. We have

yiwarudj in church. We all go there to sing a song and show mercy to one another. The bininj knowledge, which only the old people know, is about a story given to their ancestors. It's not just the words but also the things that live which we are related to like the sun, rocks, fire and green ant. We get this from our mothers. It is good if we join these two types of knowledge together and try to balance it, instead of pushing one off the edge of the cliff and leaving one behind. We must always support our children for their further education because it is very important. They are the ones who are our future. (Brandon Garrnaradj)

Holistic assessment was viewed as the most appropriate method to assess bininj teachers in their progress through the course. In using holistic assessment, the underlying view was that the performance criteria were indicators of competence rather than essential components of the elements of competencies being assessed. This allowed for greater flexibility as bininj teachers approached course tasks in different ways, but created items that were a product of group learning rather than individually constructed ones. Bininj teachers knew they were being assessed, but this seemed to be not an important part in the process: rather a well thought out and expressed idea was the key.

Similarly, space was created for individual reflection so that bininj teachers could collect their thoughts before expressing them. Quite often the products of these critical thoughts were revisited. Bininj teachers, after further discussions, would add to or completely redo artworks, to accommodate new thoughts. Through critical reflection, bininj teachers have written about 'both ways' pedagogy, about country, and how country can inspire educators to reflect on, talk and write about a philosophy that informs both ways practice.

As I reflect on my work at Gunbalanya and the work of bininj teachers I have come to the realisation of the importance of place. By thinking about place, rich metaphors and stories have emerged to describe program planning and delivery. The notion of place has inspired us as a group of adult learners to think, talk and write about significant issues, especially the place of both ways education as a philosophy within the school, and as a way of informing curriculum and the learning journey. For the bininj teachers the learning journey will continue in this place, while for others this place will continue to act as a source of reflection. (Jack Frawley)

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