AT THE HEART OF LEARNING

(SERIES: PAPER 2 OF 4)

Witulya mulapa nganana mantjintjaku: From cultural devastation to cultural re-invention

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Abstract

For remote Central Australian Aboriginal communities, the world has changed completely and irrevocably in the space of a lifetime. Drawing on Jonathan Lear's (2006) *Radical Hope*, the authors highlight the comparative struggles outlined in Lear's reflection on the life of Crow Indian chief Plenty Coups. For Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people), the same question that confronted Plenty Coups arises: "How can Anangu pursue a 'virtuous' Anangu existence in a world where 'being Anangu' no longer 'makes any sense'?" The authors explore the possibilities of choosing cultural re-invention over resigning to a sense of "the end" and consider how the recognition and retention of long-held values might benefit the broader experience of education, rather than be considered as a barrier or constraint to "success".

Keywords

Anangu education, remote education, culture, philosophy, values, cultural interface

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Introduction

The purpose of this series is to afford an opportunity to remote educators to kulintjaku (to hear, think and understand) Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) standpoints about the things that constitute "the heart of learning" from their perspective. Nakata (2007b) explains that "standpoint accounts … depend on reflexivity and the distinction between experience and standpoint" (p. 11). For further discussion on Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007b), see the introduction to this series in paper #1, "Putuna Kulini: The Trouble with 'Hearing'".

This paper aims to highlight the underlying issues of power, identity and knowledge that face Anangu as they engage with Western education. In taking account of these challenges, the authors will suggest important considerations for re-imagining Anangu identity and the purposes of an Anangu education.

We have titled the four papers in the series "At the Heart of Learning":

1. "Putuna Kulini: The Trouble with 'Hearing'" (Osborne, 2014)
2. "Witulya Mulapa Nganana Mantjintjaku: From Cultural Devastation to Cultural Reinvention" (Makinti Minutjukur & Sam Osborne)
3. "Kurunta Kanyintja: Holding Knowledge in Our Spirit" (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014)
4. "Kuranyu-kutu Nyakula Nyaan Nyanganyi? Imagining the Future" (Burton & Osborne, 2014)

"After that, nothing happened": The spectre of cultural devastation

In his Quarterly Essay on remote education in Australia, Noel Pearson (2009) refers to Jonathan Lear's biography (2006) following the life of Native American Plenty Coups, a revered Crow chief. Lear describes the scene in 1921 where Plenty Coups lays his war bonnet in an open grave at the foot of the Unknown Soldier, watching it disappear after a few quiet and solemn words. The scene is played out in front of the United States President and the leaders of Italy, France and Britain. It is a solemn and intentional signal, heralding "the end" of the Crow warrior, and announcing the journey into the unknown. In later life, Plenty Coups recalls Crow history to F. B. Linderman:

> "I have not told you half of what happened when I was young," he said, when urged to go on. "I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing. But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them anymore. After this nothing happened." (Lear, 2006, p. 2)

Of course, life went on in the physical sense, but the point is clearly made: the world had changed and the entire axiomatic foundations of Crow knowledge, values and lived realities could not be returned to as they had been for millennia as they no longer "make any sense" in the new cultural landscape. Despite his declaration of "the end", Plenty Coups leads his people to an era of re-imagining what it means to be a "virtuous Crow" in a world where "being Crow" no longer makes any sense.

"Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have this hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it" (Lear, 2006, p. 103). Plenty Coups envisages the devastation that would befall his people as a young boy and in a sense, in re-interpreting his visions, the elders give him a mandate to lead a cultural re-imagining in order to survive the imminent devastation he foretold, to "listen as the chickadee listens", and to re-imagine Crow life after the death of Crow existence in its known form.

In contrast, Sitting Bull, a contemporary of Plenty Coups, had little time or respect for Plenty Coups' philosophy and apparent unwarrior-like position, which he interpreted as

indecision and lacking courage. Despite engaging in his own struggle for re-interpreting a Sioux existence in a colonized world, Sitting Bull was killed in a struggle of resistance, holding true to the ancient warrior values he knew. He had determined to some degree that a life outside of the known world of the Sioux warrior was ultimately not one he desired.

The Anangu experience

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, Anangu have arrived at the same historical precipice where they are peering "into the abyss" of the "cultural devastation" (Lear, 2006) that faced Plenty Coups. There is still a small group of elders who grew up in an environment independent of colonization, education and the culture clash that has irreversibly confronted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians across the last 200 years. Billy Wara, for example, is recorded as giving figs to the explorer Harold Lasseter, who was perishing from dehydration, in 1931 (Hilliard, 1968, p. 117)—this being Billy Wara's first contact with a white person. Billy Wara died in 2008 aged in his early 90s and was a model of the quintessential, virtuous Anangu man. And yet the world that he grew up in is no more and never to be returned to. The values and disciplines that shaped him through the processes of learning to make spears, hunt kangaroos, survive in desert environments, look after sacred sites, and the law that brings all of these knowledges together are not lost, but the processes of acquiring these values have shifted irrevocably.

When I (Makinti) was young, many Anangu lived in homelands. That was really important to them and some of the very old people are still able to do this relatively independently. Homeland living seemed to represent everything that reinforces Anangu identity: peace and quiet, the land and the animals, being on country and living in your own space. Old people still choose to be in that space, but they need to come back into the community if others in the family are struggling. My father established a homeland near Ernabella and we would stay out there and learned so many things and shared so many experiences. We hunted game, kangaroos, dug for honey ants, witchetty grubs, camped out and learned to manage a fire, shape windbreaks and form the right sorts of social connections with others. Now, young people aren't connecting with knowledge in the same way and government-funded housing programmes are completely focused on resourcing urban-style living in communities. We still go out and reconnect though. At times we go out hunting for meat and other things.

Recently, an elderly Anangu woman recalled memories of my father to me. She said that my father was respectful, strong in knowledge, quiet and gentle, speaking strongly when necessary and a man of strong ideas. As she recalled these things to me, I thought of the Nelson Mandela-like qualities that he possessed. He was a good man, so clear and powerful in his thinking and also provided strong discipline to us as children. Another man also recently recalled an experience about him that reminded me of how he was able to retain a strong and deep sense of values, but openly embraced cultural change where "old thinking" needed to be challenged. At the time of this story, a controversy had erupted within the Uniting Church at Ernabella. Some of the established elders insisted that services could only be run by ordained elders and leaders. In this example, a community member stood up to open the service and was challenged, being reprimanded by some of the elders for breaking the "rules of tradition". Some of the community members were afraid, but my father stood up and challenged this idea, arguing the need to embrace change and that we can change our mind and forms of expression on these types of things. He was courageous in the way he stood up, encouraging others to be responsive to necessary change, not aggressively adhering to a sense of tradition that ultimately wasn't deeply important.

Like Plenty Coups and Sitting Bull, Anangu have made significant and ingenious accommodations to broker the two cultural contexts simultaneously, straddling the two worlds (see for example Healthy Aboriginal Life Team, 1991; Jones, 2007; Kral, 2012). Sometimes, it is difficult for Piranpa (non-Indigenous people) to see that, despite the fact that Anangu children wear Western clothes, access Facebook accounts on their mobile devices and have a love affair with popular culture, Anangu values lie strongly embedded beneath the surface. The question is as relevant today for Anangu as it was for Plenty Coups in 1921: "How can a young person be 'a virtuous Anangu' and yet completely modern in a world where 'being Anangu' no longer 'makes any sense' in the way Anangu culture has been lived and expressed since time began?"

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics (Arbon, 2008, Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2007b) explore this question from their various communities and standpoints across the Australian context; in particular, drawing our attention to the presence of existing axioms, cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies, rather than focusing on a perspective of deficit, or "loss". Nakata (2007b) puts it in these terms:

> For many Indigenous students and lecturers, regardless of their distance from what we understand as "the traditional context", the Indigenous epistemological basis of knowledge construction and the ways of "doing" knowledge are not completely unfamiliar. These are embedded, not in detailed knowledge of the land and place for all of us perhaps, not perhaps in environmental or ecological knowledge, but in ways of story-telling, of memory-making, in narrative, art and performance; in cultural and social practices, of relating to kin, of socialising children; in ways of thinking, of transmitting knowledge, even in creolised languages; and in that all encompassing popular, though loosely used term, "worldview", and so on. (p. 10)

Indeed, even Plenty Coups' declaration of "the end" was not a literal end, but perhaps a declaration of the beginning of the re-imagining and re-interpreting of Crow identity. Nakata (2007b) reminds us that the "embedded" nature of knowledge and ways of being should not be mistaken as evidence of an "absence" of knowledges, values and inherently Indigenous ways of expressing an Indigenous identity.

Makintiku tjukurpa (Makinti's story)

Here is a transcript of the speech I (Makinti) delivered to remote educators in August 2012 about the challenges that face Anangu in moving from "the end" of an era in the cultural sense to a future that is full of hope and one that amplifies closely held Anangu values.

> The old way of life living in the bush has come to an end. The way that our ancestors lived long ago has ceased. We know and understand their way of life, their life of travelling around country, but we can't go back to that time.
>
> Although we can't go back to the way it was, we know all of the things they did. Of course, they made spears, made dishes, lived with their family on country and kept their language strong. These are the strengths that we hold today. We continue to keep all of these things strong; bush foods, the native animals and water holes. And we are holding on to these things with strength today.
>
> But now we are in modern times and we are looking ahead so that we can move into the modern world. Things like education, training, study, qualifications and jobs. We really want to see these important things. All of these things are important for us as Anangu to do, to learn, to take hold of so that we can have expertise in these things.
>
> But having kept our own ways strong, we want to get a strong education and to live as

experts in our own traditional knowledge. These are the questions that we, as Anangu, need to ask ourselves:

- What is holding us back?
- What are the difficulties for us?
- What are the things that are drawing us backwards?
- Why are we unable to move ahead to the future?
- Why are we going back? There are great things ahead.

Nelson Mandela made a statement that has great power:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" [2003]

"Education nyangatja pulka mulapa nyuntu nganana nyanga palula-wanungku nganampa kulintja uwankara kampa kutjupankunytjaku." [Makinti's Pitjantjatjara language translation of Mandela, 2003]

And I'm saying this sort of education will open doors for us to enter into, this is a very powerful thing we need to take hold of, *but* we must continue to retain our own power forever without abandoning it. Let us all continue to carry this together with us into the future. (Minutjukur, 2012)

Cultural re-invention: An Anangu domain

I (Makinti) have clearly outlined a passion and willingness to embrace the "witulya mulapa" (genuine power) that (white) education offers, but want to strongly emphasize that this is not a case of "cut and run". As Anangu, we have our own power that we wish to retain and this power is to be carried forward in the pursuit of the power that education offers.

Nakata (2007a) outlines the struggle between "an acceptance of the value of integrating two systems of knowledge—traditional and scientific" (p. 187) and the "dominance and perceived superiority of scientific knowledge" (p. 187). In "Learning Versus Education" (Osborne, 2013), the author highlights the strength that three Anangu elders reflect on in learning traditional knowledge (ecological knowledge, hunting, the dreaming as it pertains to land, law, histories and so on) and developing the self-disciplines of learning through observing the modelling of relations and working on a cattle station. In schools today, deep knowledge, self-discipline, identity and connection to family, tjukurpa (the dreaming) and country are not easily engaged with and not easily measured within the scope of remote schooling and "what matters" in terms of nationally compared data. This drives a tendency for school leaders and the systems they work in to increase their focus on the immediately visible aspects of educational outcomes such as attendance figures, nationally compared literacy and numeracy test results (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011), retention rates into secondary years, and transitions to further training and employment.

We are arguing that these things should not be assumed as the sole vehicle to obtaining a powerful education and remote educators need to take account of Anangu standpoints, axioms and epistemologies in order to provide a school-based education that amplifies Anangu strengths, capacities and identity. This is the sort of education that builds hope and the capacity for aspiration (see Appadurai, 2004; Leadbeater, 2012), opening the way for schooling and remote education to really "make a difference". A remote education needs to be a declaration of "the beginning of the re-imagining", an opportunity for Anangu to take their strengths and identity forward into new contexts and challenges, rather than leaving students with a feeling of resignation to "the end" of everything we are (Lear, 2006).

Outside of the school fence, there are many good examples in Anangu communities where

traditional values, learning styles and social relationships are valued and, in fact, underpin the strength of the work, rather than being identified as an obstacle, or barrier to "success", as is often seen in education contexts. Art centres, for example, draw on intergenerational knowledge and relationships to provide an employment and economic focus in communities right across remote Australia. In this context, ecological knowledge and knowledge of the tjukurpa (traditional dreaming stories/law) is an asset rather than an antiquated hindrance. There are a range of other areas that education could link into that build capacity for young Anangu to engage their Anangu identity, history and values through their formal education. Engaging with the environment and ecological knowledge, for example, opens strong learning opportunities to engage with land management, ranger programmes, tourism, and management of sacred sites in the future. In this series, Katrina Tjitayi has talked about the importance this type of learning has for "opening the spirit" of young people to engage with learning new things and Sam Osborne has explained that beginning with Anangu knowledge and practices can be an important starting point for scaffolding students across to successfully engage with Western knowledge; for example, environmental sciences in this case.

Ecological knowledge, traditional skills of toolmaking and hunting and gathering, tjukurpa and social interconnections are all underpinned and amplified in Anangu languages. Katrina Tjitayi has explained in this series how important building confidence in our children is so that they succeed in their learning. She also described how important language and the "constant close voices" of Anangu around children are to build their confidence to learn new and foreign things. In talking about the importance of taking our power with us into the future, we need to speak up strongly for our language as the foundation of knowledge and identity.

In my own (Makinti's) experience, I really embraced learning "into a new world", but I can't change my colour or my language or who I am. I want to retain my own power, but I also want to lead the way to acquiring a new power. If we abandon who we are, we won't recognize ourselves and we will be lost. As Anangu, we need to know who we are and where we come from. Piranpa see us and sometimes look at us and can't see the power and the knowledge that we hold. They develop a sense of this over time but they can't see it straight away. I push young people to embrace teaching and learning and one day we want to see them finally arrive into an excellent job, but they will take our knowledge, culture and language with them and we will support them. It's a long journey. I want to see my granddaughter get a good education but I also want her to retain her own culture and story.

Remote educators must first recognize that Anangu have a sense of power that is embedded within an epistemological framework that differs from their own (Arbon, 2008, Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2007b). They secondly need to understand that in the pursuit of a "powerful" education, this "other power" is being carried on the journey. They must be willing to accept that, despite the rhetoric of an equal enthusiasm for "whitestream" (Haraway, 2004) values and motivations, the reality is that a resistance position is often preferred where knowledge and value systems are in apparent conflict (see Munns & McFadden, 2000; Osborne, 2013). And finally, educators must understand that it is from this position that Anangu genuinely wish to "take hold" of the power that mainstream education offers, but not at the perceived cost of abandoning the deeply embedded identity of "what it means to be Anangu".

As we have argued here, the task of re-imagining and cultural re-invention—that is, the pursuit of a "completely Anangu" identity in a post-modern, neoliberal world—lies with Anangu themselves. Rueben Burton reminds us in this series of the limitations the Piranpa

teacher has in regards to fostering a sense of aspiration in the Western sense amongst students, and that family are critical to a young person imagining the future. Educators need to take account of the context they work in and to present "powerful" education opportunities for the students they teach, but it is neither their task nor their privilege to direct the re-inventing or to prescribe the values they must adopt. In this sense, they need to learn to shift their own power positions, moving from a position of "authoritative expert" to that of a "knowledge broker". Educators therefore need to make room in their learning structures to allow intergenerational engagement with families and, more broadly, Anangu knowledge. This has implications at the system level too, where the complex task of cultural re-invention is least likely to succeed in a relationship that is directed from a Piranpa system-led policy agenda. In that sense, the task of cultural re-invention is also an important consideration for remote education more broadly.

Glossary

Anangu	an Aboriginal person (this is the term Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people of Central Australia use to refer to themselves)
kulintjaku	in order to hear, think, know about, feel and understand
Piranpa	a non-Indigenous person
tjukurpa	commonly referred to as "the dreaming", but refers to Anangu law, histories, culture and stories
Witulya mulapa nganana mantjintjaku	"We must take up genuine power"

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