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Arts-based service learning with First Peoples: Interlocking Communities of Practice

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Abstract

The core of service learning in post-secondary education is a range of partnerships between higher education institutions and communities, as co-generators of knowledge. This paper, reporting from a national arts-based service learning project involving three Australian universities, is concerned with communities of practice that influence stakeholder values and attitudes as well as enhancing the work readiness of pre-service teachers and university students in music, screen arts and journalism. It builds on seven years of practice and research in arts-based service learning with Aboriginal communities (2009-2015) and a nationally funded project that

entailed service-learning programs at three Australia universities in partnership with Aboriginal communities in regional and metropolitan areas Australia (2011-2013). Drawing on the concept of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, the paper discusses the benefits and challenges of working as an interlocking community of practice. Within this community, inter-relationships underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings, and as part of a network of inter-dependence through which our understandings of being human were troubled by our need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history.

Keywords: *Service learning, Communities of practice*

Introduction

The concept of a community of practice was initially introduced as a way of thinking about knowledge management, reflection and learning within commercial organisations. The term “communities of practice”, a phrase coined by Wenger (1998), emphasises that learning is an intensely social practice and that this is so for all learners - even, and perhaps especially, adults and professionals. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) argue that informal social networks which form around (or perhaps despite of) individuals and institutions can be profound sites of learning where communities, social practices, meanings and identities intersect in productive and sometimes unexpected ways. As Wenger (1998, p. 215) writes:

... learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person ... a specific kind of person.

Communities of practice challenged conventional boundaries and created the possibility of what Wenger (1998, p. 118) described as a new “landscape of practice”. Analysing this landscape, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) noted that organisational practices took on a community dimension when different people, with different expertise, worked together on common tasks and learned from each other. The communities of practice approach is, consequently, an organic one, using qualitative data from work on which partners have collaborated to extract how such partnerships are best conceptualised and cultivated (Hart & Wolff, 2006).

This organic approach within a landscape of practices describes how our arts-based service learning (ABSL) research with communities of First Peoples has been conducted and disseminated. Research across the three Australian programs at Griffith University, University of Western Sydney and Curtin University has also shown us how a relationship-focused, strengths-based approach, underpinned by

community leadership and critical reflection, can lead to transformational learning experiences (Bartleet, Bennett, Power & Sunderland, 2014). This paper extends our research and thinking through consideration of interlocking communities of practice: communities that, whether school based, studio based or print media based, intersect in a network that has enabled the communities to share their learning and to learn from each other.

Drawing on the concept of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, the paper discusses the types of learning we have acquired by working as an interlocking community of practice. Within this community context we describe how inter-relationships underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators and learners, and as part of a network of inter-dependence through which our understandings of being human were troubled by our need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history. Emphasising the *process* of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, we also discuss three interconnected ways of learning: namely, *Ways of Knowing*, *Ways of Being*, and *Ways of Doing*

(Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014). Finally, we draw on our experiences of community to consider how university-based service learning can best be positioned for longer-term community engagement.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we combine a range of conceptual-theoretical resources with the experiences of students, community members and educators. We also draw on insights from the critical service learning approach we have used in our practice, because it enables us to focus the development of intercultural relationships on authenticity, social change and agency: "... to analyse the interplay of power, privilege, and oppression at the service placement and in their experience in that placement" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 65).

Our thinking for this paper is underpinned by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In his review of the philosophy, West (2014, p. 48) cites definitions including "humanism or humaneness" (Mnyaka &

Motlhabi, 2009) and “the process of becoming an ethical human being” (Mkhize 2008). Mkhize’s focus on process is particularly pertinent to our service-learning work because it is in the social process of being and becoming that our understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings are troubled and (re)framed. According to Ramose (1999, in West, 2014, p. 48), “Ubuntu is best understood as a combination of ‘ubu-’ meaning ‘being’ or ‘be-ing becoming’, and ‘-ntu’ representing ‘being’ taking concrete form, or ‘temporarily having become.’” In contrast with Western individualism, *Ubuntu* emerges as theoretical framework in which the process of being and becoming human can be examined in relation to its social construction and its enactment within interlocking communities.

Approach

The notion of a community of practice and its foregrounding of learning as social practice, as identity work and as being and becoming

human, underpins our attempts to further theorise service learning. Here, we were guided by two studies of learning communities consisting of supervisors and postgraduate students (Bennett & Male, forthcoming; Harrison, Pithouse-Morgan, Conolly, & Meyiwa, 2012) in which *Ubuntu* was employed to help understand the community and its relationships. Participant experiences are drawn from interviews, journals, digital stories, and written reflections completed by all stakeholders as part of the service-learning project.

Once ethical approvals were granted, students were invited to participate in one of three service-learning programs in which they would work with Aboriginal community members on community-led projects. Two of these were located in Tennant Creek in Australia’s Northern Territory, and the third was located in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. Students at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) worked with artists at the Winanjjikari Music Centre, where they recorded music, attended song-writing workshops, and helped with the Barkly Regional Arts Desert Harmony Festival.

Each program incorporated intercultural training and orientation together with discipline-specific and general support for students.

Pre-service music and drama students from the University of Western Sydney also worked in Tennant Creek and surrounding areas, where they taught in schools, interacting with welfare initiatives and contributed to community programs with the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. The Curtin University program involved students from screen arts and journalism, who worked for a semester with local Aboriginal communities to help document and report programs relating to community concerns such as grief and loss, health and wellness, and negative reporting of Australia's First Peoples in the mainstream media.

The team undertook three waves of analysis. Thematic discourse analysis commenced with formative work conducted by team members (see Bartleet, 2012; Bartleet & Carfoot, 2013; Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014) and this provided an initial thematic coding schema that was adopted and refined to meet the needs

of the national project. Aboriginal people on the team's advisory board advised and gave feedback on all aspects of the study, including language and research approaches. The team has acted on the belief that cultural settings are significant drivers of methodology. Next, qualitative data (interviews and focus groups with students, teachers and community members) were analysed using NVIVO (version 10) software. The number of interviewees was 124 over a period of three years in 2011-2013. The analysis involved inter-rater checking of coded material at regular intervals. Finally, the coding schema was streamlined to develop interdisciplinary interpretations of the full dataset. Analysis of the data revealed key themes: building relationships; reciprocity; and reflection. Other related issues included the importance of sitting down on country, respecting diverse cultures and worldviews, and engaging in critical reflection. Expert peers evaluated the final dataset before the team adopted it.

Findings and Discussion

Discussed earlier, we have drawn on the philosophy of *Ubuntu* to help explain the social process of being and becoming that underpins our understandings of self as a network of researchers, educators, learners and human beings. In seeking to trouble and (re)frame dominant and/or unconscious beliefs we have also been inspired by Aboriginal scholar Karen *Booran Mirraboopa* Martin's (2003) descriptions of a *Quandamooka* worldview, which highlight three key ways in which the process of learning can occur. Our combined dataset revealed three of these interconnected "ways of learning" to be common across each of our programs: namely, *Ways of Knowing*, *Ways of Being*, and *Ways of Doing*. These insights have formed the basis of the Framework shown in abridged form at Table 1 (Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014), which aims to promote reflection on how to support respectful and mutually beneficial learning partnerships with First Peoples.

Table 1 Abridged Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

Ways of learning	Ways of engaging	Key insights derived from the project
Knowing	Sitting down on country	Whether the ABSL program involves travelling to a remote, far away country or rediscovering the country that one regularly lives on, a very necessary step is to slow down, observe and connect with the country and its people. This will most likely ensure a much deeper engagement for all concerned.
	Respecting culture & First Peoples' worldviews	When value is placed on respecting and learning about Aboriginal cultures and worldviews from Elders and the artists themselves, we begin to take a vital step towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content in a way that privileges the holders of that content.
	Transforming understandings & worldviews through critical reflection	When critical reflection accompanies the embodied and emplaced learning experiences in ABSL programs, participants have the potential to experience deep and long-lasting lessons that radically transform their understandings of themselves, their arts-practice, and the world around them.
Being	Building and deepening relationships	Taking the time to develop trusting relationships with people and partners is the most fundamentally important part of this work. These relationships underpin everything that is learned and experienced on these ABSL programs, and without them any kind of meaningful engagement is not possible.
	Learning & sharing in reciprocal ways	Embracing an asset-based approach to ABSL programs allows us to become attuned to the reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways in which participants learn from one another in these contexts. When viewed this way <i>all</i> participants are active learners with something valuable to share.

To illustrate how our interlocking communities of practice influence stakeholder values and attitudes as well as enhancing the work readiness of pre-service teachers and university students, we first discuss the different types of learning we have encountered as an interlocking community of practice. Next, we align this learning with our mission to ensure that our students become work ready. We then explore the inter-relationships within this community and how they underpin members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings. Within this we give examples of how, through a network of inter-dependence, members' understandings of being human were troubled by the need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history. We end with recommendations for how these insights might be applied to practice in other settings, programs and contexts.

Working and learning as interlocking communities

The notion of communities of practice and its foregrounding of learning as a social practice and as identity work leads us to consider how we might further theorise service learning. In this paper we highlight the way in which each of our programs has learned from those in previous years (longitudinal community learning), has learned from the other contemporaneous programs within our national project (intra-community learning), and has learned from the First People's communities with which we have worked (inter-community learning).

Longitudinal learning

Longitudinal community learning is perhaps most evident when people from a completed service-learning experience come to speak to a subsequent group. In this sense, even within university-based communities of practice where student members may be active members only for a specific time, the community remains an agile,

member-based organisation within which knowledge is transferred according to the needs of its members.

When this learning is scheduled rather than opportunistic or fluid, as is often the case within time-constrained service-learning programs, the value of new learning is sometimes not realised by members until some time in the future. This was evidenced by student teacher Ellen, who reflected on the point at which the relevance of earlier learning has been realised:

The guy who talked about his experience last year, Paul, said, “It’s all about the kids”, and I didn’t get it then. But he’s right. When you get here, it’s all about the kids. Teaching here’s so different – physically different. It would be good to show the way kids react to teaching, such as the amazing things you see in that music room. It would be good to show the way kids behave differently –

there’s an entirely different culture. I think the language to describe it is really limited.

Music graduate Greg described a similar experience when he returned to the program two years later as a peer mentor:

I’ve changed a lot in two years and I think ... it’s just re-cementing the values which I learned last time but may have forgotten. ... There are just so many layers and so much depth within every different part that you can be learning for years and still only scratch the surface. I guess that was a learning curve in itself, just the only way that you immerse yourself in a different culture is just by taking the time to learn. I feel like I’m better at communicating with the guys as well, and being a part of the team again, which is – I’ve done a lot of work by myself or in very small groups and just “troubadouring”

around and having to find that social skill set just to make all the bits work. That was a bit tough at the start for me but I think I grew into it.

Intra-community learning

As in any community of practice, intra-community learning occurred between all stakeholders. On our case this occurred in formal modes relating to technical, cultural and discipline-specific knowledge, and in formal modes relating to these aspects and more. With the pre-service teachers, for example, even in the first year of the program the importance of the evening meal and debrief was evident:

It did not happen every night. When the team would come together, the sharing not only of the meal but of the preparation of the meal was important. Then everyone around the table would have a chance to speak – what their

class was like, how their teaching was progressing, what resources they were thinking of using. (Anne)

In very practical ways, the debrief sessions were experienced by students as an occasion for supporting one another. Debriefing enabled the students to critically observe their own and others' practice: to "think for themselves, question and engage in dialogue" (Trede & McEwen, 2012, p. 29). One example of this comes from pre-service teacher Terri, who had decided to make a tree shape she called a 'poe-tree' (poetry), on whose branches she wanted to hang the printed poems written by her class. Another member of the group had carpentry skills and helped construct a simple tree shape from plywood. The collaboration and shared practice was valued by the group, one of whom wrote:

Speaking about the people on this team, I've got so much time for them and so much respect. It's been an amazing experience making friends with them. (Lee)

Inter-community learning

The community learning experience *within* student cohorts (intra-community learning) was also felt *between* communities as the relationship of trust developed between those who had come from the universities, either as undergraduates or post graduates, and the broader community. This inter-community learning emerged from candid and empathetic discussions (McDermott, 2000) about what the members wanted to achieve, what they were enjoying, and what challenges they had faced. The journalism and screen arts students worked together in inter-disciplinary teams, and they found new value in working beyond their regular discipline communities:

... it was a group ... able to bounce ideas off each other, I think that really helped quite a bit. ... journos and FTV [film and

television] students coming together to form a group instead of just isolating them apart, having that difference. (Cabe, journalism)

Similarly, pre-service teacher Lynne, who wanted to give her students the opportunity to perform a new dance as a “flash mob”, was pleased that her teacher peers went along to support and encourage her and the students. She was, however, surprised that interlocking community relationships—what she described as an “outer community”—stepped in to enable the event's success:

I always expected the students to be really close like a family, but I have realised that they really care and look out for each other within their school community and outer community. It is wonderful to see the students connect and work together in such a way.

A related type of learning experienced across our community of practice work relates to the interactions between First People's teachers and their communities. Heather, a teacher working in Elliott, north of Tenant Creek, talked of needing to engage in inter-community learning in order to strengthen ties with the community in which her school is located. For Heather, the development of what Wenger (2010) calls "regimes of competence" was essential in order to meet the community's expectations of competence and, as a result, to gain membership:

When I came up here, a lot of the old people that I met, we used to go out for culture trips with the school. They were strong in believing "you've got to learn to say it, you've got to learn your own language". They used to get me to say words that I didn't know. Then I learned. (Heather)

It is from demonstrations of ways of learning and from the strong beliefs of Indigenous communities that we have drawn our plans to make projects enduring and sustainable. Our programs have always been delivered in consultation with the communities in which they are situated. In each project, relationships have driven our agenda, determined our community activities and underscored our intra- and inter- community interactions. Community members have valued the engagement that is central to a community approach, reflecting that "a lot of the time, people go through these experiences - they have the opportunity, they look, listen and they learn, but they don't have that opportunity to engage" (Kate, community member).

An enduring sign of this learning is the way in which some of our student and pre-service teacher participants have been given "skin names" relating to Aboriginal kinship groups. This complex system determines how people relate to each other and their roles, responsibilities and obligations in relation to one another, ceremonial business and land. In line with *ubuntu*, skin names helped students to

realise the inter-connectedness of people and place. As such, skin names prompted students to focus on their process of becoming by reframing each “action already performed, an enduring action or state of be-ing, and the openness to yet another action or state of be-ing (Ramose, 2003, in West, 2014, p. 49). Along with the students, we have been trusted with a sense of the community that is how First Peoples care and interact with each other and their country.

Communities of practice and developing work-ready graduates

As educators working in higher education, we are concerned with how such experiences help students to develop their work readiness in terms of intercultural competencies: what experiences shape the commitment and capacity to challenge inequality and injustice, and how these relate to students’ experiences within the communities of practice. The reflections of all those who have engaged with First Peoples’ communities illustrate that these experiences are transformative for them personally and professionally. Working and

learning alongside experienced teachers, musicians, journalists and community Elders has brought about change in the ways of thinking, worldviews and values of all stakeholders.

In terms of the students, these regimes of competence were achieved through *engagement* with others, *imagining and locating* one’s self as a professional, and *aligning* one’s self as a learner, professional and human. The transformative learning that arose from students’ lived experiences within these communities resulted in or what Denzin (1989, p. 70) has called illuminative epiphanies: “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives”. Community members valued these outcomes, relating them most often to experiences that might prompt students to rethink the dominant discourse about Aboriginal people. Community members were particularly keen for students to consider “who is heard in the media and how they are heard and represented” (Thomson, Bennett, Johnston & Mason, 2015, p. 145). This is seen in the following quote from community member Craig:

This is good for say Aboriginal black fella and white fella relations ... the students, when they come to an Aboriginal blackfella community, they've no idea what it is. The only sort of stories they have is what they see on the news and what other people tell them about blackfella communities. So when they come here it's really good for them - it gets them to learn first-hand and, you know, and they get involved. Then they go back with different ideas from what they come with in the first place. (Craig)

As a result of this thinking, professional identities have broadened and deepened to allow for enriched cultural meanings shaped by intercultural relationships. For journalism student Tabitha, recognition of the uninformed assumptions about Aboriginal people had prompted her to rethink her own position, and that of the mainstream media. In one reflection, she wrote:

...there just needs to be some sort of cultural understanding. Because it's not just about Aboriginal Australians, it makes you rethink your attitudes towards every other race. It's not always like blatant racism usually; it's the assumptions that you've made. (Tabitha)

Music student Kim also reflected on coming to a more respectful view:

...the culture of these Indigenous people is so different from my prior understandings about what their culture was, and they have been blown out of the water. I've learnt so much about who they are. I sort of - yeah, I just felt a lot of respect. (Kim)

Reflections also motivated action, seen here in the comments of pre-service teacher Bronte:

I think it means not trying to push my ways, but try to understand why things are the way they are. The root of the problem is bigger than me coming in for a time to educate in the classroom. But you hear people say, and I was one of them, “Yes, the government’s giving them more money and they don’t need it”. But having seen it, it’s certainly not the picture that we’ve had painted for us. I should be ready to stand up with them. (Bronte)

These three reflections demonstrate some of the changes that have taken place in thinking: the acknowledgement of former assumptions, the admiration and respect for culture, and the intention to “stand with” Aboriginal people, shoulder-to-shoulder, in empathy and collaboration.

Some students began to think about how they might effect change, and to do this they imagined themselves in positions of

influence. This was particularly true for the students of journalism and screen arts, whose future career may lie in the media:

... it really made me think if I was ever in some - if I was an editor or responsible, even as a sub-editor, I would be extremely conscious of the way that other stories - the way that stories come out. ... it has made me want to get into a position where I can have influence over writing. (Lizzie)

I think it did make me identify the power we have as journalists more. I’m much more critical of the news because it’s just small decisions that if you don’t know better, can shape the whole way a person interprets a story. ... It might just be a crime story or something, but as soon as you make it about another culture it changes that whole view. It shouldn’t be an issue of what colour the person’s skin was. (Sam)

For these students, interdisciplinary teams will be the norm once they enter the graduate workforce. As such, the teams made a practical contribution in terms of work-readiness; however, as Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 5) have observed, the benefits to members were broader than this: members became “become informally bound as colleagues who understand each other’s perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people”.

Research link in interlocking communities

Over and above these examples has been the way in which the research team has also been a research link in the interlocking communities of practice. While we are all musicians and educators, we had varying levels of experience in working with First Peoples communities. We came together as a team to decide on the research instruments, to gather the reference group and to plan when and how we would share our data.

We came together to present our research at conferences and to disseminate our findings through papers and an edited book (Bartleet et al., forthcoming). Our practice unconsciously drew on the pedagogy of writing groups that provide such powerful opportunities for learning (Aitchison, 2009). When we collaborated in writing, we sent drafts to each other and shared the responsibility of lead author, in the manner of chamber musicians moving to cue each other (Neidlinger, 2011). We shared new literature to inform our practice, and we shared our challenges and doubts.

Our collaborative work has had many chamber music moments, where one of the group members will commence with a theme and others will enter in with a commentary and counterpoint to it. It is no accident that chamber music has been called the most spiritual form of music (Tovey, 1944). This seems to neatly return us to *Ubuntu* and to our Framework especially in terms of our understandings of self and

the spirit that makes us human, our deepening of relationships and our sharing in reciprocal ways.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explored the inter-relationships within our broader community of practice and how these underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings. Within this exploration we gave examples of how, through a network of inter-dependence, members' understandings of being human were troubled by the need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history.

In each of our projects, we have had the experience of watching aspiring professionals refashion their worldviews as a result of their interactions with each other, with us, and in particular with First Peoples communities. We have also observed and documented four kinds of learning that occurred within these communities of practice. The ongoing sharing of information from one year to another among

the university graduates and post graduates is a powerful way in which they share “the practical aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work” (McDermott, 2000, p. 2).

The internal support between concurrent members emerged as a different and more intense community experience overlaid with the emotions stirred by intercultural encounters. Moreover, by interacting with their local communities, students and student teachers demonstrated different ways of learning, grounded in strong beliefs that were developed through a process of deconstructing worldviews and beliefs. Through these networks of inter-dependence these young professionals developed work-ready attributes such as intercultural awareness, and they began to imagine how this might be enacted through professional advocacy.

As educators we have also encountered “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks” on us as scholars, educators and humans (Denzin, 1989, p. 70). These have occurred in

our own relationships with First Peoples colleagues and our relationships with one another, with students and with community. They have been strengthened by our increasing advocacy role as we, like the students, imagine and then activate opportunities for increased advocacy and action. And they have informed our own learning through our collaborative community of practice as we share the findings of our research.

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