

# **Recontextualizing Design Education for Aboriginal Students from Remote Communities as a Strategy to Overcome Their Perceived Estrangement with University Education**

## **Keywords**

Pathways to Higher Education, Design Education, Overcoming Indigenous Disengagement with University Education

## **Abstract**

This paper sets out to explore an approach to generate an effective pathway to higher education, currently not valued by Australian Aboriginal students living in remote regions, perhaps because of inappropriate emphasis on (English language) literacy and numeracy, and the denigration of visual and other arts, and Aboriginal culture in general. For students living in the unique physical and social landscape found in remote Australia to overcome the perceived irrelevance of university education, an approach which provides a more culturally focused knowledge of the potential for design principles would have an obvious attraction.

The paper sets out to determine how a vocational program in Graphic Design in a dual sector institution focused on graphic novels, could take advantage of the rich visual storytelling tradition and to overcome probable language challenges by developing unique design principles, whereby Aboriginal students are able to draw on their own traditional and contemporary aesthetic, reflecting their visual, spatial, cultural and 'legal' relationship to the landscape, we aim to explore ways that might allow that to become the basis for their design thinking and visual decision making, by incorporating strategies developed for the successful integration of design history and 'theory' with design practice, which could allow Aboriginal students to bring their own aesthetic knowledge as a starting point (even if it's not verbalizable).

It may also lead to a unique mainstream Australian design practice

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## Introduction

Charles Darwin University allows that thirty percent of its student population claims identification as indigenous, which matches the percentage of the indigenous population of the Northern Territory overall, however there is little evidence that traditional or remote community Aboriginal people are participating in university education in significant numbers, particularly at Higher Education (HE) levels.

Aboriginal culture embodies an extraordinary rich visual storytelling tradition, as evidenced by the art ubiquitous in their environment and dating back many tens of thousands of years, and the internationally recognized importance of their contemporary art. As effective visual communication design embodies the idea of storytelling at its core, as can be seen in the best graphic novels, visual identity and communication design. Therefore Graphic Design or more commonly these days, Visual Communication Design or Just Communication Design may reasonably be an appropriate area of university study for Aboriginal people. However few Aboriginal students, particularly those from remote or more traditional communities, make the transition to university study, not even through vocational education (VET and TAFE), (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2010) which might seem more appealing to them, particularly in design.

The Bradley Report documents that transition from vocational education to university for indigenous students has been problematic for more than '25 years' because of 'incompatibilities in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment' (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] & Bradley 2008, p. 179). The Indigenous Higher Education Review (IHER) for 2012, identifies ongoing problems in, and recommends clearer definitions of, pathways to higher education (Australian Government, Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2012, p. 39, 44). Not only are the pathways unclear, and the curricula, learning approaches and assessment measures apparently viewed as inappropriate by would-be Aboriginal students, it is apparent that the language, rigidity and purposes of academia are viewed as irrelevant to their way of life.

This may begin with the local and regional administration of remote community schools, where the denigration of visual and other arts and inappropriate emphasis on (English language) literacy and numeracy, in under the mistaken idea that these skills alone will prepare them for a 'job' in the mainstream (white) society, when there are no jobs in those communities, As a result, these students are being alienated from the 'schooling' process by its undermining of their community languages and values. As an example, in the presentation 'Understanding and promoting aspirations for higher education in remote Indigenous settings: Lessons learned through the Whole of Community Engagement initiative', Lesson 5 reads 'Improving English Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) is critical (Smith et al. 2017 p38) It goes on to assert under its Key Findings, that 'Investment in

remote Indigenous English LLN support is critical in school, VET, and higher education pathways', rather than providing 'school, VET, and higher education' that is appropriate for their skills, values and needs

Ward (1999), in particular, documents many acts of deliberate frustration of Aboriginal educational aspirations. For instance, after the Wave Hill walkoff, while the Gurindji elders recognised the benefits of 'white' education, and welcomed it into their community, they also wanted to have their elders participate to incorporate their own law, history and traditional way of life. However no opportunity for this was ever incorporated or enabled when schools were established in the Dagaragu (Wattie Creek) or nearby Kalkarindji community. Recently news stories have documented how school attendance, achievement and respect for education have improved markedly at the Lajamanu community just by having Aboriginal elders physically spending time in the school, indicating their recognition of the importance of education to the students. The author's personal conversations with art and other teachers in remote community schools in particular, also reflect the lack of cultural respect and recognition of the artistic importance and ignorance or deliberate denigration of what Aboriginal people are good at and what they value in favour of western values

Further, while many of the programs offered by Charles Darwin University can be completed by distance education or on-line, this might be seen as really appropriate for indigenous students in remote communities, because of the distress they would experience leaving the support and spiritual strength of their families and community, and the undermining loneliness and alienation they might experience in a (relatively) larger community. However, this opportunity is considerably constrained by very limited technical access available in most such communities because of the small populations of most of them, the large distances they are from major population centres *and* each other and the large number of of these communities. This is likely to be a particular impediment to a high quality visual imagery based program taught remotely with existing technology. However this may also be a creative challenge which could involve innovative 'low tech' and community based ways of delivering the program based on individual communities needs, language, place, etc. Revisiting my earlier comments, however, indicates that this is most likely to also be a major challenge for the larger (white) community, reactionary government, traditional educational institutions, one-size-fits-all nationwide standards authorities and unimaginative or corrupt regional education administrations.

This alienation may also be exacerbated by many of the perceived pointless and prohibitive protocols, language, etiquette and archaic ritual which have in the past been used to maintain academia access uniquely for the privileged. Many of these these qualities may not advantage knowledge and learning themselves, and in many cases become constructs and orthodoxies which inhibit them (Robinson 1998), and are clearly perceived in that way by underprivileged socio-economic groups including Aboriginal people. This is not to say that

universities need to compromise their standards, but they do need to rethink the ways in which these standards are achieved, especially as many of them may be dysfunctional as well as discouraging towards learning to all students, and undo many of these perceived discouragements to university education for Aboriginal students in particular, and even more so for those from remote or 'traditional' communities, who already may be alienated from such 'white' aspirations due to 'interventions' and other ongoing acts of deliberate frustrations of their own Aboriginal aspirations by governments and other vested interests (Ward 1999, Hokari 2011).

It is hoped that the strategy set out in this paper may be useful in overcoming some of the reluctance perceived in many potential students, so that they are encouraged to undertake rethought and restructured vocational education pathways to university education. This is not to say that universities need to compromise their standards, but they do need to rethink the ways in which these standards are achieved, and undo some of the perceived irrelevencies mentioned previously.

Overcoming these inhibiting characteristics of university education may not be easy, if, indeed it is possible at all, as the newer universities in this country strive, unsuccessfully, to establish that they are equally worthy of the designation in the eyes of their predecessors earlier established institutions, which in turn have strived to imitate the medieval ideals of European and North American models, alas. On the other hand, however, many of these newer universities were assembled from previous institutions, including Colleges of Advanced Education (CEAs), Polytechnics and Institutes of technology, some of significant standing, by a centre left government trying to widen access to university education\*. Such is the case in the author's university. As a result of this, some of them still retain Vocational Education (VET) or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programs, which have distinctly different and much less unfriendly, intimidatory, judgemental and sanctimonious approaches and protocols, entry requirements, codes of teaching and assessment. And because, in \*these cases, these are in the same institution, they may serve as a less intimidating pathway to higher education courses in these institutions<sup>†</sup>.

Even so, we cannot expect universities to completely capitulate on their protocols, however dysfunctional and unreal they might be for indigenous students, even though some universities have been able to climb down from their isolated positions in order to meet practical needs\*\*. But it might also be useful to prepare indigenous students for some of these forbidding approaches by slowly introducing them with ways to deal with them during their progress through a vocationally oriented program. In order to achieve a really effective

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<sup>†</sup> In this case, initially, but not limited to, undergraduate university education

<sup>\*\*</sup> One such case is the University of Newcastle Medical School, which takes a large percentage of its intake from communities that need doctors rather than by academic achievement. This initially resulted in a reaction of many of the big teaching hospitals in neighboring Sydney refusing to accept these students for clinical training. However, most of the Aboriginal medical

pathway to higher education, compromise must take place on both levels, which one would hope would be more achievable in institutions that incorporate both vocational and higher undergraduate education<sup>\*\*\*</sup>.

Initially though, it may be argued that design programs in vocational education can be seen as more appropriate: there can be a more integrated program where all the separate 'units' can be structured so as to be interdependent where each can be seen to use the principles and outcomes of the others, building on them from level to level, and supporting each other with common understandings across theory, practice and technical or skill units at the same level. In contrast, often in a university undergraduate design program, the units may exist independent and distinct and without regard of each other.

Further, there may be culturally supportive VET units that can be included in the program, which can be integrated across all units in the program and influence their content and the way they are structured and conducted.

### **The importance of integrating design history and theory with design practice**

Perhaps the most important integration though, along with this culturally important focus for Aboriginal students, is the integration of history and theory units with practice. This is germane for all students, as the role of the designer changes from the individual 'gifted' practitioner to team contributor, effective communicator, collaborator across disciplines, creative problem solver and idea manager rather than producer of stylish aesthetic and attractive (literally) outcomes which might have been to be the designers role in the past. Perhaps the best designers always worked this way, particularly as many of them worked in pairs or larger groups, and were effective writers and theorists. This is particularly important for Aboriginal students so that they can develop a practice focused 'knowledge', an epistemology developed from their own extraordinary historical visual storytelling and analysis of their own present and past visual communication

The principle skills needed for this in modern western culture will be the ability to articulate and argue for the analysis and criteria of the problem, the principles required to arrive at a verifiable outcome and an understanding of, and the ability to articulate the processes needed to get there. It becomes apparent that the 'knowledge' of design, inherent in what is usually labeled 'history and theory' design, is becoming increasingly important in educating designers for this new/old role. However a form of design 'history and theory', or 'knowledge', needs to be taught that is relevant to design practice. Too often this has not been the case.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Unfortunately this is not always the case, as these sectors often see themselves as fiercely competitive and can be extremely

This may not be easy, as Paul Slocombe, a lecturer in design history and theory at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design who introduced a course called “The integration of Theory and Practice” wrote to me as follows; *“I had to fight for a number of years to liberate the responsibility for theory and history from what was a separate department. They were entrenched in out of date approaches, teaching slices of disconnected history which the students found spectacularly irrelevant. Achievement was low”*, (2005, personal communication) illustrating the resistance we have to overcome to make history, theory and research relevant to design practice in the real world. While the 'real world' for students from a traditional remote Aboriginal community may differ markedly from an urban 'white' community, the same principles apply; it is just the nature of the history, 'knowledge and practice may be different. We must also not ignore the potential for these students to practice in the wider world, particularly with more and more interactive communications media

In education for the new role of the designer, design projects must be expected to be the outcome of the application of theoretical underpinnings, or design knowledge, requiring documentation of the way that the readings and/or analysis contributed to the design decision making. In the author's classes students have found that greater knowledge and understanding expanded their creative possibilities markedly. Informal conversations with art and other educators teaching in remote Aboriginal communities suggests that this may also engender greater respect for students own history and visual culture, so strongly undermined for a long time, but would also be a great introduction to analytical and research skills. As well, it may also foster greater respect for the schooling process, and hopefully for university education subsequently, particularly if appropriate pathways and similarly based programs are available

However, in mainstream university design education, some resistance from students who had previously been doing something less demanding and perhaps personally indulgent, gave rise to the realization that this process needed to be introduced at the beginning, thoughtfully and gently, by initially providing foundation level readings or examples before gently weaning them onto their own resources. This led to the understanding that this approach might be particularly appropriate for Aboriginal students who could replace 'readings' with analysis of their own culture and visual heritage to tell stories in their own way from the very beginnings of their education. It would have the added benefit of showing respect not only for their own culture, but for their ability to direct their own learning from the beginning, learning to discover their own underlying epistemology as the basis for their decision making and adjudicate the value of their own work

The following comments indicate several key issues which are important in arguing that the principles underlying such a program must be based on, as Paul Slocombe states in regards to his program:

- 1 *relevance to current practice,*
- 2 *self directed study, so that the students are involved and engaged in determining how they make the connection between theory and practice,*
- 3 *Integration of the principles through practical application*
- 4 *students experiencing the relevance immediately and continuously, not as an abstract concept, and are then able to take that to the rest of their practice,*
- 5 *students being required to analyse and keep records of their processes*
- 6 *Students using media technology that is relevant to and familiar to them. (ibid)*

The last of these in particular may be observed to be specially germane to remote Aboriginal students, who may experience a singular relationship with place, community, history and law, and be equally remote from modern technology, where this approach may represent an equally unique opportunity, and indeed, the research project which inspired this paper is based on establishing the validity of this possibility and putting it into practice.

The Author has previously instituted such an approach in undergraduate design education in a more mainstream context to encourage students participation in this approach, by having students record annotations in their own words of the readings or analyses, then, most importantly, recording the application of that to their own design decisions.

Whereas previously the research had often been quite superficial, and its influence on the students' process had not been demonstrated and documented, and did not become part of the rationale for the design decisions they had made. Therefore this more serious requirement and more demanding level of research and its application to practice would change students' attitude to the design process, especially analysis, creative problem solving, idea generation and verification of both the process and the outcome. It would reflect a more realistic (and perhaps more assessable) account of the way designers work, or, perhaps more importantly, will work in the future. More academic essays might instead be based on presentations the outcomes of this way of working, strengthening and reinforcing its importance rather than these essays just being an unrelated end in themselves. rather they could serve as a rationale for the design, as might be presented to clients, marketers, or other decision makers. It would be both less demanding of so called 'academic rigour', and more useful to students' design decision making and therefore a more realistic reflection of professional design practice. It is not hard to imagine how this approach could be equally useful for students in a remote Aboriginal community and in VET programs suited to be a pathway to higherr education programs for them

History also might better approached it as research based case studies, allowing design practice in the past to relate to current design practice and under the same paradigms. Students would then be able to include the criteria, approaches, philosophy, ways of thinking technology and methodology of that time which led to those outcomes thereby

giving them an understanding of the way that current design practice is the outcome of all the design practice that preceded it — of its own history. This may give them a more realistic understanding of what they do and why they are doing it and the ability to better communicate and justify that decision making to others. This might be uniquely appropriate to Aboriginal students who have their own striking 'design' history embodying communication of their stories, law and culture.

Also, rather than academic criteria, assessment might reflect the way designers in professional practice would be required to judge, verify and justify their work, on the basis of the underlying theory or knowledge that it embodies, and to articulate, communicate and verify the validity of their design outcomes. Corso and Gluth (2009) have found self assessment based on an in-depth understanding of why those decisions have been made, to be much more constructive and educationally productive when assessing creativity, rather than attempting to 'judge' the 'creativity' of the outcome rather than the process

While there has often been concentration on the commercial usefulness for business of design as embodied in so-called 'design thinking' as advocated by the d school at Stamford and Tim Brown at Ideo design consultancy, Rick Poyner has pointed out how design goes beyond this 'mere' economic advantage which ignores and devalues its cultural significance and possibilities. A different emphasis on 'design thinking' could be the basis of a much more relevant design education of use to remote community Aboriginal students, and equally be of great value to more widely based design education;

*'the implications of two new design terms that have recently come into use: 'design thinking' and 'critical design'. 'Design thinking' is taught in American business schools and seeks to challenge design's established practices and received ideas. But it does this from a business perspective, and while it claims to empower design's users, its concerns remain essentially commercial.'* (Poyner, 1999)

As well, while there is considerable emphasis in vocationally oriented design programs on providing the 'skills' required by industry, there is also the opportunity, perhaps uniquely, to provide for the special needs of a variety of student needs, particularly disadvantaged and culturally diverse students. Perhaps unexpectedly, there is very strong importance given to creativity, for instance, in the VET teaching and assessment standards (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2015), which therefore may offer a uniquely supportive pathway for remote Aboriginal students to university education which may not be apparent in mainstream design courses in higher education focused on professional employment.

**The design of a program centered on the design and production of graphic novels as a constructive strategy for conducting a vocational design program for indigenous students from remote communities**



It would appear that a graphic design program based on these principles aimed at Aboriginal students from remote communities based around creating graphic novels might be a positive avenue for indigenous students because it builds on their strong tradition of storytelling through visual imagery and its associated powerful cultural aesthetic. It might be a way to go beyond a perceived lack of English language skills and have the potential to establish reconnection with traditional culture, stories and law. English might be at best a third and least used language, their first being that of their language group, their second the krio used in their (unnatural) community, and other languages from neighboring language groups. Such a program could also be uniquely effective because it is likely to be an unpretentious medium their age group is familiar with and appreciates, and one which encourages them to perceive themselves as highly literate and capable communicators rather than the existing negative stereotype of semi-literate. Graphic books are no longer the idle domain of the teenage comic reader, but have come of age even in academia (Sousanis, 2015).

They are becoming appreciated as a serious communication medium in their own right; *'Infographics have the ability to **show** viewers what to do, as opposed to **telling** them what to do. If the purpose of a communications effort is to educate or instruct, an infographic will be able to clearly demonstrate a goal to a viewer, where they might get lost if going simply by verbal or written information alone.'*

(The Social Communicator, 2014)

## **In conclusion**

This ongoing project aims to use an initial vocational program in design based on graphic novels as a model for pathways for indigenous students coming into a wide range of courses in VET and HE and to provoke adaptation of the accreditation process to allow for the diverse range of cultural influences present in Australia's population. Rethinking visual research methodologies should facilitate the design and implementation of a new course in graphic design at the VET level for Aboriginal students. It is

The point of this is to allow us to *explore* new ways in which the teaching and research in graphic design suitable for Aboriginal visual communication students. The aspiration is that this will then change the way we think about appropriate visual communication more widely to be able to transcend its traditional textual resources and cultural biases and instead look to a more authentic Australian design based on an interdisciplinary approach. This may specially be possible in Australia's most remote and sparsely populated territory where engagement with isolated communities may allow the project to highlight and make productive use of the sophistication of the visual approach that takes place in Aboriginal communication and avoid the overwhelming temptation to imitate global conformity

This exploration would aim to incorporate much greater appreciation and acknowledgement of the high level of visual literacy of Aboriginal students coming into VET rather than perpetuating the condescending notion that Aboriginal students are semi-literate because of low level English language skills. The perpetuation of this notion of semi-literacy inhibits the understanding of other kinds of literacy, particularly the concept of visual and spatial literacy which is now becoming valued as a way in which knowledge can be taught across disciplines for all populations, language levels, and cultural and religious barriers.

The project aims to develop new visual research methodologies by working across disciplines in partnership with Aboriginal communities to develop new ways to think about graphic imagery which enhances traditional forms of communication and offers exciting and innovative ways of communicating ideas for the rest of us. It aims to overcome the emphasis on English language literacy that discourages other histories and theories of design principles, image design and computer application.

Critical analysis of the research process involved in developing the program will be informed both by the critical theory behind the text – *Deep Listening* authored by Wallace and Lovell (2009) and the community-based creative idea generation practice. As Simonsen et al. maintain that '*all design is situated - carried out from an embedded position*' . . . and that it . . . '*involves many participants and encompasses a range of interactions and interdependencies among designers, designs, design method, and users*' (2014, p 1). By situating the design process and concerns of the remote Aboriginal community itself, an embedded position can inform the designs and methodology. This in turn also informs the Design and Creative Arts educators about the concerns of the community.

Sir Kenneth Robinson (1998) argues that the education system ignores multiple types of intelligences and so loses the creative thinkers who we need more than ever before, and in that context, Helen Verran also argues that design theory is seen to be driving a major scholarly paradigm shift in which design theory is replacing epistemology (2010).

Building on these example, the project will set out to determine the culturally appropriate competencies and settings needed to teach these skills. This critical analysis will address the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) curriculum criteria, but go beyond this criteria to drill down to the interactions and interdependencies needed that pervade Indigenous knowledge transfer in remote communities.

The project will set out to determine what design principles are appropriate, including appropriate narrative structures, continuity and visual interest, production and mediums collectively and collaboratively amongst all the participants, so as to be suitable and motivational for the readers/students, to explore what types of alignment are possible between cultural forms and practice, as observed by indigenous graphic artists, and to

examine the skills and knowledge that graphic designers must demonstrate in order to be deemed 'competent' in the language of AQF curriculum?

Above all, the research proposal is not about instituting predetermined approach, but collaborating and allowing self discovery by aboriginal people of what they want from a university education, what approach is useful for them, whether a Graphic Design program based on the creation and production of graphic novels can provide that, and what's possible

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