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Teaching From Country Student Forum

'It was like the walls of the classroom came down around us.'

Written by Christian Clark in consultation with the participants of the Student Forum, Teaching From Country International Seminar, July 27-29, School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia.

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Introduction

The Student Forum was the student contribution to the Teaching From Country International Seminar. This paper documents some of the discussions and reflections that arose from the Forum. The Forum began with the feedback from individual students in the Introduction to Yolŋu Languages and Culture, the course which used the Teaching From Country Program (TFC) as its primary form of pedagogy. The feedback was collated and students were invited to participate in a discussion about the Program and then a report back during the Seminar. During the month between the ending of the course and the Seminar, Christian Clark liaised with students in developing a plan for the discussion. Beyond direct feedback about the course, the Forum invited discussion on experiences of learning Australian Indigenous knowledges and culture in other university settings and how Indigenous knowledge systems interact with mainstream academic institutions. A number of past students and distant education students who were not present in the TFC classes were asked to engage with the TFC website, particularly the Trials sections, and reflect upon their own learning and experiences in relations to what they saw going on in the TFC Program. On the Sunday afternoon preceding the Seminar, a group of past and present, campus and distant education students and future students of Yolŋu Studies gathered together at Charles Darwin University to discuss in person the program and the themes that had been emerging from our online exchanges. This discussion and its reporting back to the Seminar constitute the body of this paper. The quotes are taken from individual feedback and the discussion, however they are not referenced with participants' names as they are included here as part of what is a collectively produced document, rather than a document of collected individual experiences and opinions. In order to present the more fluid discussion to the Seminar and in this paper, some headings under which to loosely gather what we had said were developed at the end of the discussion. Christian

made a table which rearranged the minutes of the discussion under these headings, and this became a resource and prop for us presenting to the Seminar. As this paper has been drafted, and emailed to participants for feedback and changes, these headings have remained as little more than structuring devices for the text.

These five headings include a discussion on the appreciation of students toward the empowerment of Yolŋu knowledge, learning styles and authorities in the teaching in the Yolŋu Studies Program in the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the understandings of learning and what it is to be a learner which emerged, and reflections on how to interact with knowledge authorities in recognising moments of teaching and what constitutes these moments. The role of the technology in mediating and facilitating the TFC trials is discussed, along with the potentials for future trials and courses.

Empowerment

> **'I felt that having predominantly Yolŋu teachers throughout the semester created a real sense of ownership and authority over what cultural and language information we were learning. Not only did this feel like we were learning cultural content, but also cultural learning processes and structures.'**

The discussion began with many questions: How do Yolŋu understand learning? Are there important separations between age and gender? Are there any other examples or instances where Yolŋu are specifically teaching Balandas (Europeans)? Did we know what was expected of us? Many of these questions were left unanswered, and one in particular – 'what is the motivation of the Yolŋu teachers to engage with teaching non-Yolŋu?' This was asked of the Yolŋu teachers during the Closing Forum. What became evident as the questions led us into discussion was that as questions they had not inhibited a positive and fulfilling student experience in the TFC Program. Students felt that there was an 'overarching structure of what was expected and what to do.' More importantly, students felt that this structure was provided by the Yolŋu teachers and was a direct result of Yolŋu being in control of the teaching and curriculum. When empowerment was mentioned as a word to capture this, the description was, 'It was like we were brought more into the Yolŋu world than they were brought into ours.' Participants who had been students at other tertiary institutions and teachers in remote Yolŋu schools noted that Yolŋu being in control of the teaching of their knowledge and the education of their community was extremely rare.

In some cases the important negotiations over Yolŋu knowledge and its teachings were visible. For example, when Yiŋiya was teaching from Dhamiyaka (Trial 24). Being there, with his older brother who was the traditional owner of that place, Yiŋiya pointed out that the authority originated from his brother and that the country itself supported his teaching much more easily than if he were elsewhere. In Trial 14 Gotha and her son-in-law, with much help from a young boy, had to carefully negotiate the space where the computer was set up, as to maintain the strict kinship laws they were not able to be in the room together. Often, these negotiations were not visible to the students. Much of the course was only possible because of the relationships and trust that had developed between the Yolŋu teachers and their families and John Greatorex and Michael Christie over decades preceding the TFC Program. Other negotiations students were only vaguely aware of or were simply assuming must be being done in order to deliver such an extensive and rich course in learning Yolŋu language and culture. An example of this might be efforts made to alert the old lady from Ramingining (Trial 18) that her brother Yiŋiya was in the classroom in Darwin on the other end of the video cast and she needed to stop saying anymore until she was aware of who was there. There are strict social rules about what a brother can hear about or from his sister and all the Yolŋu worked to make sure a difficult situation didn't arise. Students were very comfortable with these necessary, but not always visible, parts of the course and its development because they felt it was Yolŋu who were in control and determining what was to be said and shared and what was not. During one class when Gotha introduced herself on screen, one student commented that she felt

inspired and empowered to learn from this woman and felt that the course remained very 'people centred' despite it using some very new and sometimes erratic technologies in setting up the teaching sessions.

Learning

> **'I feel as though Teaching From Country changed the way I learned a Yolngu language. It brought the walls of the classroom down, and we were able to visually see the people, in Arnhem Land. Seeing them there, giving up their time and telling us stories from where they were, their home, gave a reality to what was been taught.'**
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> **'I got the sense that there was an overarching something that was what was expected of us and it was us within it, engaging with the technology and what was happening, and what we got out of it ourselves, which was a very satisfying way to learn.'**

Most of the students had experienced being a learner at Charles Darwin University or at other Australian universities. The experience of Teaching From Country stood in stark contrast to many of these and some of the structuring assumptions about education made around conventional university settings. Each Teaching From Country trial constituted the first hour of each class, after which a second hour was dedicated to students working through their grammar, pronunciation, understanding of kinship, spelling etc. The Yolŋu Studies course was not simply 'another subject', a 'box to tick' or a knowledge for you to deposit in your 'bank' of knowledge and qualifications (though much work was done to ensure it did meet the university's requirements for assessment, course review, and study streams.) Students felt they were being given a great privilege in being participants in the class. They did not feel they were given a broad or general survey of 'knowledge', nor simply a course in an Australian Indigenous language. The course offered an insight into Yolŋu life and culture and the learning was understood within this context. The students were amazed at the level of detail the teachers *on country* knew about their places. Students understood their learning to be situated in the community of teachers *and places*. This led students to think about how this knowledge they now share might move or applied elsewhere or not. One comment was quite cautious in this regarding, saying, 'You do think about your career and what jobs you might *not* do, that might *not* use your knowledge well and others that will use it properly.' This gave an indication of how learning was understood not simply as gathering new facts but a life long and personal endeavour.

Yiŋiya's teaching provoked much introspection in students and motivated them to 'look into yourself and see how you are going along'. Some students felt that they became more aware of their own knowledge and assumptions, and therefore better able to critically engage with information and knowledges presented to them within a university education. Students understood knowledge to have effects and becoming a learner also meant becoming responsible to the community and knowledge traditions within which you learnt. In the words of one student about the effects on herself in doing the course: 'I'm feeling different, I'm talking differently, I'm walking different, I'm feeling different'. Considerations of the effects the course had on us as learners began in the discussion and was the subject of many questions during the presentation. While this was not made explicit in the course, it is remarkable how so many of the students thought of themselves, their learning and future directions very differently after participating in the course.

Teaching From Country 'brought the walls of the classroom down.' Through the screen in which much of Teaching From Country took place, students learnt much more than simply what was being said. Seeing the children (Trial 18 for example) and families and hearing the conversations in the background added to the students learning rather than distracted them from the individual teacher. Students could also see and appreciate that the teacher had all the resources for teaching on

their country and just how many there were: family and kinship, history, buildings, the trees, wind, water and sea, all visually present in the classroom.

One device the student forum used to talk about moments of being a learner in a very new and emerging kind of classroom was an 'ah ha' moment which was understood as a sudden awareness of learning and understanding that was perhaps unexpected or unfamiliar. All the 'ah ha' moments people talk of were mostly to do with kinship. All Yolŋu Studies students are assigned a mälk (or 'skin' or subsection name) which places then with gurrutu – the Yolŋu system of kinship which relates people, places, seas, ancestors, songs, and all beings which inhabit the land. Both moments of feeling the immensity of being connected in such a way during time on country or in class, as well as suddenly seeing one's own family and relatives and places and moments through a very different framework were felt to be profound. We wondered together, 'are such moments indicative of learning what gurruṯu is' and would this understanding be the same as that gurruṯu which the Yolŋu teachers were describing? For some students learning and experiencing gurruṯu was very powerful. However it was still felt that these experiences were not comparable to those described by the Yolŋu teaches. For students, gurruṯu did mean something important, and connected people, but it meant many more things for Yolŋu which non-Yolŋu students agreed, they would never understand or feel.

A few students had spent considerable time living with Yolŋu in Arnhem Land. These students wondered whether their experiences of learning *on rather than from* country were deeper or more authentic than those students participating in learning via a video link from Darwin. One student asked, 'do you long to get out on country?' Another student who had lived in Arnhem Land for over a year said she felt the student were very lucky, as in communities people are often too busy to provide some explanations and you have to spend a long time building up trust. Even in the classroom, however, students described a very different way of learning compared to working one's way through a set syllabus. Students were provided stories and descriptions but were still unsure as to how to relate to them as teachings. Some students felt fearful of not showing the right respect in asking questions, or simply not knowing how to construct a question when one is thoroughly confused. And let's not forget, all these trials were already available on the website for others to view with some these very students embarrassingly exposed.

Students described much of the stories they were told as metaphorical. As metaphorical stories they did not appear to have self-evident meaning and students were often unsure as to know any broader relevance to what they were being taught. In some particular cases, what sounded metaphorical to the non-Yolŋu ears, was real for the Yolŋu teacher. A dance for example, was not a representation to be interpreted (rightly or wrongly) but an enactment of a real experience. In most of the lessons students agreed that you learn much, but at the same time you knew there was much more that you did not know. Rather than each lesson culminating in tasks the student would be easily capable to completing, many of the lessons were determined by the teacher, where they were, the seasons, what had happened that day at that place, whether an internet connection could be made or not, whether the wind was too loud, and many other things. Students learnt to be learners in these situations in the sense that not only were they aware of understanding valuable content, but also an understanding coming to have understandings while being aware of only knowing a very little.

Teaching

> **'One difference is that Yolŋu teachers just started talking. There was little introduction with their name and where they where, but after John explained that this was about not drawing attention to oneself and exactly where you are and one's individuality.'**

Students felt that their learning during the Teaching From Country Project was not simply being given 'just another bit of information to slot into all your other information.' Student felt much more part of a learning community, and as part of the Student Forum considered their experiences and understandings of the role of the teacher. Students felt their Yolŋu teachers to be very friendly, and 'more human' than teachers they had previously experienced. One student commented that a Yolŋu lecturer he had spoken to did not see herself to be a teacher in a conventional sense. In response to this, another student commented that she understood the Yolŋu teachers as 'demonstrators of knowledge, not so much as lecturers.' Perhaps indicative of this was Yiŋiya's comments during a moment of disconnection in the video cast to a religious studies class in California (Trial 22). He commented that the students were asking so many hard questions and perhaps, he joked, they did not like him. Here, what in a different context might indicate engaging students interrogating a lecturer for more knowledge, Yiŋiya felt rather awkward. Intensive questioning is a sign of bad faith in Yolŋu knowledge work. So he jokingly suggested that these questions to be could suggestive of mistrust of him and his ability as a teacher. The only evaluative remarks regarding the teaching had to do with the location of the teacher, the very question the Project attempted to address. Students experienced the teaching from Yolŋu to be much more confident when they were teaching from their country in comparison to using slides shows in Darwin. Nevertheless, having teachers, both Yolŋu and Balanda and sometimes up to three (John, Yiŋiya and Michael) in the Darwin classroom was vital. Their commentary during the video casts greatly aided student understanding and participation and students felt the time after each video cast during which they talked about the language and some of the significant events in the video cast to be extremely important.

Technology

> **'About technology, it is experimental and people accept that.'**
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> **'I found myself smiling a lot and becoming aware of a sense of pleasure when watching the screen.'**

A program like Teaching From Country might attract the most interest because of the technology in use. In the Student Forum, there was little discussion about technology per se. Maybe Teaching From Country was appreciated by the students as an experimental project in which classes were trials. Because the project was seen as valuable and worth pursuing by the Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu teachers, the students were willing to go along with the technical complexities of the project. Second, in light of the discussion above, the program clearly facilitated rewarding learning experiences which suggests the occasional faults in achieving a clear video cast in every class were not seen as a major problem with the project. In the classes where Skype was not able to bring the teachers and students together for a consistent length of time, the glimpses they did get were still valuable. Students felt that the learning community was very strong and that the technology, its successes and faults, brought people together more than it fragmented the learning environment. The great advantages the students saw in the classes performed as 'videos' were that they were interactive and 'right up to the minute'. In this sense they were more 'real' than other multimedia presentations, often capturing kids playing, passing conversations, buildings and the surrounds of Yolŋu living. While the very new and complex achievements of computer, satellites and software were often centre stage, it was the presence of some older technologies, whiteboards, maps, pronoun charts, tea and biscuits, which held the class together in the times when the internet connection dropped out.

Futures

> **'How would it be if something like TFC was used in a environmental science course or natural resource management about learning about place?'**

'There is great interest in Japan and it is just for Dhäŋgaɭ, her brother and family and language. It is not Gupapuyŋu or Djambarrpuyŋu and Teaching From Country could have just her or her brother teaching. You could have Teaching From Country on Skype to Japan.'

The *interactivity* of the technology was seen as the main feature of Teaching From Country that is going to be beneficial in the future. Students could see that Yolŋu were using both older forms of media such as photographs and videos but also newer ones such as video casts and Google Earth in their lives and in engagements between themselves and other communities and were keen to see how this would develop. It was noted that in some instances the students engaged with the screen displaying the video cast as they might interact with a television and were quite passive towards it. We talked about how there might be more interaction, especially as questioning felt uncomfortable as the sole form of interaction during class. A suggestion was that students put forward their interests at the beginning of the course so the teachers could have more choice as to engage with it or not. Of course, this was not to detract from the Yolŋu control of the course structure, process and content. We also asked about whether other courses might use the program to deliver specific classes, for example an environmental studies course talking about place and location. We thought that if this was to be done, the way the framing of that course and its understandings of knowledge and education need to be thought about carefully before 'slotting' the Teaching From Country class in another course. There is a chance that the knowledge demonstrated by the Yolŋu teachers may not be recognised as such if, for example, Western scientific knowledges provided the only framing and content of particular course. There is great interest however, that Teaching From Country could extend outside Australia to places such as Japan (since the Student Forum took place classes to Japan commenced in August 2009). There was some concern however, that the Project could be seen to be advocating having external teachers. The students felt that in the future the teacher in the classroom in Darwin must remain as they are fundamentally important.

Conclusion

This paper will conclude some more quotes from the participants of the Student Forum to keep the discussion going rather than close it. To capture the Teaching From Country Project in a few words, we might say it was experimental. Experimental in that it was constituted by a number of trials, each one the result of much planning, work, and the choreographing of technological, social and political arrangements together. It was also experimental in that it produce something novel. It reconfigured learners, teachers, and places amongst other things within a mainstream university setting. It did so not by redefining them at the outset, but through each trial, carefully and respectfully the people, technologies, places and practices linked up these disparate locales, communities and knowledge traditions each Tuesday afternoon.

'I felt the video links worked most effectively in relation to story telling when they were supported by props (people, presentation, backdrops relating to story) and were aided by in-class discussions after the video link up.'

'I believe the ability to teach and speak from lands that have cultural significance add to the depth of the teachings.'

'Yes, I felt involved, like I was participating. How does the saying go? Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I'll understand.'

'I was struck at how powerful the sense of land is for the Yolngu people. This was present in the way the teaches in the home lands often referred to where they were, what was there's in terms of their home, their wäŋa.'

'Each element of learning was deeply embedded in who and where, and our being granted access to it was conditional on our knowledge of it also being rooted to who and where.'

'My presence in the Yolŋu studies classroom was quite a wonderful learning experience. I came with some knowledge but left knowing I'm really only starting to learn and so have an entire new road ahead of me.'