The Ethics of Teaching from Country
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Abstract
‘Teaching from Country’, a year-long National Fellowship funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, provided the opportunity and the funding for Yolŋu (northeast Arnhemland Aboriginal) knowledge authorities to participate actively in the academic teaching of their languages and cultures from their remote homeland centres using new digital technologies. As two knowledge systems and their practices came to work together, so too did two divergent epistemologies and metaphysics, and challenges to our understandings of our ethical behaviour. This paper uses an examination of the philosophical and pedagogical work of the Yolŋu elders and their students, to reflect upon ethical research in postcolonial knowledge practices.

Teaching from Country
In the Yolŋu Studies program at Charles Darwin University, Northeast Arnhemland Aboriginal knowledge practices have found a place in the academic world. This place, within the School for Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems – soon to become part of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Education - continues to be a site of careful work by both Yolŋu and Balanda (white Australian) philosophers working together. A group of us had already been working for many years on school and then university research and teaching work that took seriously Yolŋu knowledge practices, and their epistemologies, pedagogies and methodologies. (See for example Christie (2006), Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie (1995)). The Yolŋu Studies teaching program, established in 1994, was in constant contact and under supervision from the language owners in Arnhemland, as it developed in the city of Darwin, on the traditional country of the Larrakia people.

In 2008 I was awarded through a National Fellowship with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, sufficient funding for the development and evaluation of something we had long been talking about: a program for some of the Yolŋu elders, living on their traditional land in very remote Arnhemland homeland centres, to participate in the Yolŋu Studies teaching and research program remotely, using their Mac laptops, their G3 connectors, and a range of software with which they were already experimenting. We named the program ‘Teaching from Country: Increasing the Participation of Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Tertiary Teaching through the use of Emerging Digital Technologies’.

The ethics process with the CDU HREC went smoothly, the committee asking a few questions and letting me know which loose ends I had failed to tie up. They generally refer applicants intending to work with Indigenous people, to the AIATSIS guidelines, and over the years we have set up a pretty smooth process for ethics clearance for the varied collaborative, reflexive, performative research projects we find ourselves working on through the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative. In the many applications we have completed over the years, there are a few constant bumps which we have learnt to ride together. For example, the structure of the National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) assumes that it is natural to de-identify the source of ‘data’ from its author. If the identity of the ‘subject’ is to be made clear in the research outcomes, that needs to be justified to the committee. The committee accepts the contention that the knowledge authorities that we work with insist that they are identified as the source of their comments. That’s how the ethics of knowledge works in Yolŋu society. De-identification is wrong. Also,
when Yolŋu knowledge authorities are paid consultancy rates for participation in our projects, the NEAF requires us to justify why these payments should not be understood as *inducement*. Again, our local committee is sufficiently familiar with our work to accept that these payments are in fact also responsive to the Yolŋu ethics of knowledge. Knowledge is owned and has value. Which opens intellectual property issues. But this paper is not about those ethics (see the Holcombe chapter this volume for a discussion on the ethical management of IP).

It is these understandings and practices, which are not covered at all by the NEAF application form, which the AIATSIS guidelines refer to as the ‘Indigenous people’s definitions’, ‘perspectives’, ‘protocols’ and ‘cultural values’, which I address here. What did we learn about Yolŋu ethics when *elders-in-place, on their country*, became active in our teaching program? And what did we learn about the ethical participation of a university in postcolonial knowledge work? What I propose is that the program taught us something new about Aboriginal knowledge in a university, that its implicit epistemology introduces some metaphysical puzzles, which in turn open up new ways of understanding how to go about doing ethics. This work is hinted at in the Introduction to the AIATSIS guidelines where Ms Erica-Irene Daes, Chairperson-Rapporteur of the United Nations Working Group of Indigenous Populations, is quoted on the nature of Indigenous cultural heritage:

> Heritage can never be alienated, surrendered or sold, except for conditional use. Sharing therefore creates a relationship between the givers and receivers of knowledge. The givers retain the authority to ensure that knowledge is used properly and the receivers continue to recognize and repay the gift.

This paper looks at the work of givers and receivers as a way of untangling some questions of ethics in our ‘Teaching from Country’ program.

**The Epistemology of Teaching from Country**

Before the teaching from country started, the Yolŋu elders were already telling, recording and writing stories about country in relation to knowledge. Some of the Yolŋu theories derived quite specifically from the traditions held within particular clans, and some from a pan-Yolŋu tradition which understands and enacts relations among them.

We began with some philosophical work searching for ways of framing the program conceptually which were valid in Yolŋu terms, and which also supported translation into academic contexts. We held two workshops for Yolŋu elders, at the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems at CDU. There we heard stories of land, knowledge and place, universities, technologies, and the growing up of Yolŋu children and of Balanda (non-Indigenous) students. We had recently been working on Yolŋu understandings of ‘gifted and talented’ children in formal schooling and our colleagues at the Yalu centre in Galiwin’ku were writing on Yolŋu identity and some of the thinking there spilled over into the new program.

Yinjinya, the Yolŋu lecturer immediately identified some ways in which the program would solve an ongoing pedagogical problem: Teaching from Country is

> ‘different to the education you get in the classrooms because the classrooms don’t talk to you. We’re learning out there under a tree, we’re learning out there in the bush walking around, the trees are always communicating with you. The hills, the land, the air are always communicating, teaching you, and understand every need that Yolŋu children have to go through.’
Not only does the environment communicate with Yolŋu youngsters growing up on country, it also actively understands them. Here we have a notion of understanding which does not so much present the environment as sentient and agentive (though that may well be the case), but rather which in Ian Keen’s terms, embodies ‘a picture of the person as an arena in which things happen, rather than as the originator of actions’ (2003, p142). In Yolŋu philosophy people ‘reproduce forms rather than engaging in purposeful, goal oriented behaviour’ in ‘non-didactic’ teaching practices (p137).

Working on a separate project to do with water management, Yiniya had also commented:

‘If we don’t have a good system to care for our water resources, this land will punish us, because we are breaking the ways of the ancestors, the land is alive and watching us, the rain and wind are alive, if we look after it, then it will look after us.’

How does one actually care for the rain and the wind? By understanding them, in the same way as they understand the Yolŋu. This is not so much an environmental ethic as an ethical commitment to the ‘story’, to being there when ‘the story comes along’. In Keen’s terms, the Yolŋu ancestors ‘did not create the world out of nothing in six days; the world pre-existed them. Events that befell them gave the world its present shape. I say ‘befell’ because the signs and substance of ancestors now in the land and waters are often the result of things that happened to them, of accidents of the unintended consequences of their actions, rather than deliberate creative acts. The downplaying of agency (like those turtles) goes all the way down.” (p143)

In his original description of the potentials of Teaching from Country, Yiniya makes reference to the ways in which ‘the story comes along’ when we see particular clouds, from a particular place, on his traditional land, at a particular time of year:

Straight after the Wet Season when we sit down by the beach and look at the sea around the small islands of the hunting grounds … certain signs in the skies tell the stories, clouds … sitting around the horizon which tells who we are… the right people of that country. And the story comes along, and the children are taught. We have never learned in classrooms, we have never asked questions about what we want to learn. … the old men, the wise men, and the land and the trees, and the birds that talk with the land. It’s all connected with the learning, association with the land. The trees are all related, the trees all tell a story.

Gifted and talented children in Yolŋu society are those who are identified as future leaders of their people. They are characterized by their silent watchfulness, their listening and their quiet, respectful, biddable involvement at the fringes of ceremonial and political activity, and their respect for and support of their elders. As in so many Indigenous cultures, (see for example Deloria Jr. and Wildcat , 2001) asking questions is more a sign of ignorance and arrogance than of intelligence. Yiniya again:

Growing up we have never asked questions to our teachers, to our elders. We have never asked them about what the images are, what the stories of this land are. And in fact it is bad manners when I stop an older person, an elder, a senior elder in the clan, and start asking them questions. … We always listen when their time is right when they want to tell the story, because the land is talking to them, because their feelings and their knowledge is ready to be told to the younger generation. And when we’re asking questions … the answers are just not there… I might come back and say ‘This is what I should have spoken when I’m being interviewed’. When I’m sitting around here talking to a television. … the stories are just not there because I’m not ready to tell that story and the land is not ready to sort of talk to me about certain stories, and then the story might not be fully told, what we want to be able to tell.
What then might we conclude about how young children learn on country? Yolŋu children are not born empty, they are born with full knowledge in potentia as it were. Consider the analogy of the Wangurri clan water which wells up in the ground when the rains start, and brimming over, listening to the singing grass, and the water starts talking. It already knows its way to the swelling river and down through the flows of negotiation to the sea of agreement (the reference in text). In Yolŋu epistemology it is wrong to assume that children are empty vessels. As such a western education for Yolŋu children who are not already confident and self-assured in their own language and cultural traditions is neither effective nor ethical.

Gotha at the first workshop:

So you see, (children on country) know the land … and the breeze, and the water, what time the tide will be in, when it will be out, because they are learning on country, and it grows with them, by means of that learning. … This here (pointing to a drawing on the whiteboard) is Balanda learning, they are just hearing the story, and they don’t know its body, what do you call it (in English)? Just ‘Theory’? … Yolŋu students in Balanda teaching, they are sitting in the water tributary... it’s the Balanda spring flowing here, so they just get a little trickle, not a full stream, crying there to each other, just like the scriptures say; ‘By the rivers of Babylon’ when they were crying together, and the government says: ‘Okay, give us a story’. And the children say: ‘How can we sing a song in this place, here singing in a strange land, we can’t sing or tell a story or teach, because that law of the (Balanda) water has taken it.’ From talking, he will talk, but inside his inner being has been truly blocked. Yes, he can’t really learn anything, what is his is far away, and there is nothing inside him. So those are the two different methods, the children will learn the land, and who he is, and the stories, and where the breeze is blowing … on his skin, he knows. … I will give, and they will take what they see, they will recognise, or they will misrecognise, or they will want that thing, you see. I will just give my own story, and they will do whatever with it. I’m not going to tell them, that’s how we learn. And you will learn. Whether it’s good or bad, good practice or bad practice (my emphasis).

Dhäŋgal, another elder teaching from her country, made this point “I’m not going to tell them” in an interview on the same afternoon. When asked what she would like to achieve in the Teaching from Country program, she thought for a moment then said:

I’d teach students to really know about themselves, who they are, to see things which are good about that’s within themselves, to know who each person really is, and what they can achieve from the teachings from the Yolŋu perspective… That’s for the Balanda students as well. First of all they have to find out for themselves who they really are. I’ll be at home and feel that - what you would call - the power within. And any person that has the knowledge to pass things to other people that a lot of people miss out on by themselves, who they really are and what they should achieve.

The Sociotechnics of Teaching from Country

The complex philosophical work treated too briefly above, all took place before we actually started the teaching program. By early 2009, feeling almost confident to inch our way forward on the socio-technical side, we began exploring possible arrangements to suit particular people in specific contexts, with their particular histories, aspirations and agendas, and with particular connectivity infrastructure and access. For six months (and still continuing) we conducted ‘teaching trials’ connecting elders from remote places of significance to the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems Seminar Room in Darwin – and to other places around the world. In this section I offer a short summary of the work of the three elders quoted above.
Yinjya Guyula is a Liya-Dhälinymirr (clan) elder, and during the program, the official Yolŋu studies lecturer at CDU. He was somewhat frustrated as Teaching from Country unfolded, that he was stuck in Darwin – the traditional land of the Larrakia people – fully supportive of teaching from country, but looking himself for a chance to go out to any of his traditional estates. As it turned out, he made it to Badaypayda – to see what teaching from country felt like – how it might help him understand his knowledge work in the context of the university. He managed to do four sessions from country. There is no mobile phone connectivity available in the two significant places he had in mind, so we hired a very expensive satellite connector, and Yinjya and John together with an Honours student, drove the 700km (or so) to both sites – the first where his turtle hunting ancestors had left behind highly significant traces including the clouds mentioned above. From that place, the satellite receiver didn’t really work, some ‘technical’ problem. But we have some footagexviii. On the website we can see Yinjya standing on top of a Troopy, camera swerving, telling us briefly before cutout, that now, finally being ‘on country’, his first feeling is that ‘the stories are all falling into place’. The next day he fetches key kin – his older brother, sons, cousins etc – and they drive to Dhamiyaka, where lies a sacred well, dug by the creator Djan’kawu sisters, and make contact with a group of students in Santa Clara, California. Yinjya and the old man both tell stories and Yinjya talked about authority, permission and the young men learning. Everyone, including the young men in that sequence, had a clear right to be there, and a keen understanding that it was the camera-screen that was constituting them as young rightful Yolŋu on country for the young Californians they could see on the other side of the world. Maybe the Californians had that same experience of constituting themselves as concerned young Americans for Australian Aborigines.

Dhängal is from the Gurruwiwi family which belongs to the Gälpu clan. She lives on one of many traditional estates of her Gälpu clan people, next to a long beach at Birritjimi on the Gove peninsula only a couple of kilometers from a huge bauxite processing plant. Dhängal was involved in five teaching sessions, and two recorded trials where we set her up with a MacBook Pro, some screen sharing software, Skype and Google Earth and tried connecting up from various places – including the top of Mt Saunders and on a sandhill adjacent to her favourite mangrove hunting ground – neither of which sites could pick up a signal. But the successful sites were her home at Birritjimi and the beach at Gäluru not far away, where she sat with her family and her familiar surrounds, and told stories – of the past and future, and of what was going on around her. In one early session she decided to introduce us to her ‘gurrutu’ (kin) whom she mustered from the extended family about her at home standing shyly in front of the camera, beneath a giant poster of Elvis Presley. I felt when the session started that it would be a good chance for the students to see concrete examples of their growing understandings of Yolŋu kinship, so I began to write names of people and kin terms on the whiteboard. But as the family became more interested in what was on the other side of the screen, and Elvis was introduced as also a Gälpu clan man and thus himself a python, and Dhängal pointed out a couple of Yolŋu students in the seminar room who were also Gälpu and also pythons, and the Yolŋu started calling back and forth, Dhängal relaxed to become a matriarch presiding over a celebration of togetherness on country and in Darwin which did not need, and in fact defied explanation. She was acting with confidence and authority, and was clearly happiest when the session started to take on a life of its own, the event unfolded, and my pedagogical intentions unraveled.

Gotha is a Warramiri clan elder who was told by an elderly relative about ten years ago to leave the large ex-mission township of Galiwin’ku on Elcho Island and return to her traditional land at the top of the island and set up a homeland centre at Gäwa. Galiwin’ku was becoming too big, people were forgetting their languages and losing their connections to country. We had earlier installed a satellite dish at her house, and from there she taught a good number of classes, three of which were recorded and transcribed. On the last day of March 2009, Gotha used free screensharing software and the telephone to teach the Yolŋu studies class from the remote homeland centre of Gäwa. She showed photos of two of her great grandchildren aged about 6 and 8, off by themselves with axe and pannikin, collecting mangrove worms. She wanted to make a point about confidence in the environment, and growing up in Yolŋu knowledge.
Meanwhile, John had also been speaking with Daymaŋu, Gotha’s son-in-law, well known painter and leader, and grandfather of the two boys, asking him if he might be interested to talk to the class about his art. Yolŋu mothers-in-law must never speak to, look at, say the name of, or be in the same space as sons-in-law, and vice versa. But they care for and respect each other deeply. Not long after we started with lots of cutting in and out of sounds and screens, Gotha mentioned to John that her son-in-law, was hovering outside the door waiting to talk. One of the young boys, Makuyuk was in the room. Only momentarily distracted by the camera and peering at the students in Darwin, he soon found himself in the familiar role of helping his great grandmother out one door and his grandfather in the other one, and then, when someone accidentally hung up the phone, ushering out his grandfather and in his great grandmother to set up the sound again, and then the grandfather back in. Meanwhile John had enlisted Yiniya’s help to talk with the old man, and I was videoing the proceedings in Darwin and trying to explain to the students about the avoidance rules which gave rise to all the to-ing and fro-ing. Daymaŋu talked for a long time in complex old language, six John doing his best to interpret what he was saying, Yiniya doing his best to slow him down. The students were mostly silent and open mouthed, sometimes laughing a little at the chaos. And that was only the beginning of a long session when daily life at Gäwa came right through the screen once again.

The three episodes described above were quite different from each other. And so again were the other episodes. We never knew what to expect. One significant thing that they had in common was the camera and screen composing the Yolŋu-on-country at one end and students-teachers-seminar room at the other. Another thing they shared was a commitment to the balanda students. They had little idea who most of the students were, but they trusted the academic staff – Yiniya, John and me, and that was enough to make them feel confident that they could share their lives with interested respectful people around the world.

The Metaphysics of Teaching from Country

Having started with some rather startling assertions from Yolŋu elders about knowledge and what teaching from country means, the actual trials allowed us to reflect on how that work on country actually collided with our work in the academy, through the mediations of a large flat screen mounted on the wall of our seminar room. As people-places-occasions kept beaming through to the seminar room, and elders (and their children and grandchildren and old photographs, places, breezes, trees, beaches and sacred wells) composed their projections, we came closer to understanding an alternative metaphysics.

Coming from a variety of angles – the epistemologically active environment where stories ‘fall into place’, the healthy Yolŋu child’s knowledge work growing up the country, the teachers who refuse to teach, and the Balanda students learning from Yolŋu teachers how to be a Balanda student – the Yolŋu philosophers systematically rejected the transmission model of pedagogy so firmly embedded in the university, and instituted their own epistemology.

Stories here are performances rather than representations. They have a quite different epistemological status. Questions don’t make sense. They undermine the Yolŋu commitment to keeping people and place inseparable, mutually constitutive. The conventional understanding of the identity between indigenous people and land – as metaphor - is here enacted quite literally, requiring us to rethink the metaphysics of universities and the ethical work they require when we are no longer dealing so much with knowledge as representation coming across; not talk, or knowledge or ideas coming through the screen, but people-places-moments.

As I stood there on the sidelines, watching events in Arnhem land unfolding, trying then giving up trying to tell students what was happening (‘She’s mentioning him because he has the prior right to talk about
the other sort of Yirritja floodwater that Gotha was talking about yesterday... ‘She doesn’t realize that her brother is in the room here so they have to let her know...’; ‘She has to get the kid to tell the old man to come in because she can’t talk to him...’; ‘Those waves that he’s talking about are from his ancestral song...’) watching the students incredulous, confused, delighted. At least for some moments there we were able to understand how different knowledge and knowers can be.

The Ethics of Teaching from Country

What can I say about the Yolŋu ethics at work here? I can say at least that their ethics reflect a strong prior commitment to a Yolŋu epistemology which they find critically important, imbued with the sacred, and painfully and worryingly lacking and unrecognised in schools and universities. It’s an ethics which reveals a thorough commitment to keeping the different stories (associated with different clan groups, different places) separate, not mixed up, and being on country is really the only way to make that happen. The place tells the story. While acknowledging these prior commitments, we also see that their ethics are enacted on the run, as it were, doing the work of reminding everyone of the authority at work here (I can talk about this but not that..., the trees are telling this story..., the story comes along and the children are taught... this is my older brother who is the leader... Here the stories all fall into place...), and acting with authority that the camera and screen demands – making a projection or a composition, and taking responsibility for it. There is much work to be done thinking all this through together.

I can speak more boldly about my own ethics. What has Teaching from Country taught me about my requirements to act ethically towards the givers and receivers? About the givers: The program has reinforced the idea that the strength of the relationships between the Yolŋu knowledge authorities and the Charles Darwin University really depends upon a longstanding commitment to a respectful productive relationship which is outside of (and must necessarily remain outside of) the relationships which is ongoing with the university. The program works because of an ethical commitment to place and people, which works prior to, and remains quite separate and different from institutional guidelines for ethical conduct in research.

About the receivers: How did they react? xxx: ‘I found myself smiling a lot and becoming aware of a sense of pleasure when watching the screen.' 'It was like we were brought more into the Yolŋu world than they were brought into ours.' ‘They were demonstrators of knowledge, not so much lecturers.' ‘Not only did this feel like we were learning cultural content, but also cultural learning processes and structures.' Teaching from Country changed the way I learned a Yolngu language. It brought the walls of the classroom down’. ‘I got the sense that there was an overarching something that was expected of us and it was us within it … a very satisfying way to learn.' '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.'

Over the course of the program, the students provided universally positive feedback. They seemed not to be worried about the incomprehensibility of these episodes which more or less came upon them every Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. They were impressed and thoughtful, and clearly learned about themselves in the way that Dhäŋgal had hoped they would.

What is my responsibility here? I’m thinking of the assessment tasks which students must complete to pass the course. They remain the same tasks as before the program started. The Yolŋu have demonstrated so thoroughly their ethical work of composing places, metaphors, breezes, cameras, kinfolk for the screen, that our assessment tasks seem archaic. We must continue to engage the students and the Yolŋu elders in remote places thinking through how university and Yolŋu assessments of knowledge, learning, progress, and ‘the pass’, can understand each other. And give back to the Yolŋu lecturers the gift of Balanda students who are learning who they really are under the proper care of the university.
Conclusion: Ethics in a postcolonial university

The Yolŋu teachers did their best to institutionalise a new regime of accountability within the university. It’s a regime in which ‘They are not going to *tell* anyone’. Their work is a gift. They are accountable not so much to the students, or the environment, or each other, or (much less) the university, but to the ancient and ongoing project of bringing forth and projecting a coherent performance of the integrity and partiality of their people-places. The students learnt that knowledge from country is different from knowledge from classroom at least in part because they could see that Yolŋu knowledge work as inseparable from ethical work.

The CDU-AIATSIS ethics machine ensured as far as they could that we acted with probity in our Teaching from Country project. Now it will be interesting to embark on the task of finding good ways of working two ethical systems together, paying careful attention to difference as well as sameness. That’s exactly what Indigenous research methodology must be all about.


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1 Full details of the program, and the theoretical and technical work it entailed, can be found at [www.cdu.edu.au/tfc](http://www.cdu.edu.au/tfc).


5 All marriage is exogamous so each person’s identity involves a range of clan groups.

6 The students were not in fact all Balanda. There were some Yolŋu students, and other Indigenous students, and increasing numbers of Asian students (including on line from a Japanese university) who are not called Balanda by Yolŋu. Balanda here is used as shorthand for the non-Yolŋu students.


8 [www.yalu.cdu.edu.au](http://www.yalu.cdu.edu.au)


13 Referring here to the biblical story of the Babylonian conquest of the children of Israel, where ‘They that carried us away into captivity required of us a song, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion”. But how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?’ Psalm 137: 3,4. Especially significant to Gotha is that it was by a strange river that ‘We hung up our harps’.


For the most part, the conversational language which students learn in class will be good for an everyday conversation with any other Yolŋu they meet. (They will have to observe the kinship rules which dictate the use of pronouns etc, but by and large they will be able to participate.) However as soon as an old person starts making assertions about their particular ancestral connections, immediately the references become highly specialized, conjuring and alluding to complex networks of ceremonial responsibilities and rights which are impossible to translate – and especially impossible to interpret on the run. Daymaŋu knew that John and Yinjiya could understand.


For a good summary of the student feedback seminar, see http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/docs/Christian_Clark_TfC.pdf