

Teaching from Country

Meeting of International Critical Friends group Santa Clara, Tuesday 18/11/08

Paul, Leigh, Geof, Sampsa, Katie, Michael, Helen

Helen's notes—very partial in both senses of the term

Michael's additions in italics.

• Ontics. I began by asking Sampsa about his work—as he described it I saw parallels with the TFC situation. This is how I heard Sampsa—he works between engineers who are designer-builder-users of medical technologies and practitioner/carer users of the instruments and systems. He has followed several ‘passages’ where these different practitioner communities have choreographed their engagements in differing ways as they tried to bring good instruments and systems to life. I remembered what for me were painful meetings in IKRMNA (*our previous project – ‘Making collective memory with computers’ – www.cdu.edu.au/ik*) when Aboriginal landowners who wanted to use digital technologies and designers of databases tried to talk to each other through us. They were painful for me because I couldn't really ‘get’ what either side was on about, but we did seem to ‘get’ more of both than they. We felt that the problems were philosophical and technical rather than social and or cultural, but we could not agree on what sort of problems were confounding us. We were immersed in real time collective performance but didn't know how to go on together. *The good thing about this TFC project is that unlike the previous project where our partners had to be from ‘industry’, we are starting with an agreement and good faith on the part of all the partners from the beginning. Even though we're never going to ‘get’ exactly what each other has to say, we are ready to tackle the problems of translation, and to do something interesting, enjoyable and useful together.*

• Garma—Helen introduced the Yolŋu notion of garma - a place-time specifically designated and designed which Yolŋu groups (*at Yirrkala*) have repeatedly used over the past twenty years or so to theorise significant interactions between Yolŋu groups and ‘others’ *as well as among the many Yolŋu groups*—Michael described the formation of the Yolngu studies programme in terms of the on-going working of a garma. *The word was given to the Yirrkala school by community elders as a way of helping them understand the role of Yolŋu epistemology in school learning. I see the garma primarily as a certain sort of Yolŋu ceremonial site – there are hundreds throughout Arnhemland – where people come together for public (non secret/sacred) ‘ceremonies’. These ceremonies amount to several or many different Yolŋu clan groups coming together to celebrate and perform a shared history and from that, agree upon a decent way forward. People from all over, with their various historic-totemic affiliations come together and play their own partial, contingent part in a choreographed drama which retells an ancestral story, and tells a current reality. That's the model for Yolŋu education.*

Helen described garma as aiding and abetting the workings of a domain of ontics—which in one way or another might or might not become an ontological politics. (*Does it become an ontological politics if some participants are not acting in good faith, or have somehow excluded themselves or been excluded from the garma?*) A place to negotiate framings—metaphysics, and well as what is framed by those metaphysics. So it seems that each teaching-learning episode will be characterised by an ontics – *as in fact would all good pedagogic practice? There are many interesting ideas which emerge from the garma metaphor.*

One slight problem with working with the notion of garma is that the Yolŋu we are working with in the TFC project mostly come from further west than Yirrkala, so none of them actually worked on the garma curriculum (except maybe Dhängal?) and thus work with their own key ideas - although I'm sure they would understand and agree with the use of the notion of garma as a model of

intercultural education. Helen mentioned other metaphors which have been used in the Yirrkala school curriculum work – gänma – the productive intermingling of sea and fresh waters in particular places, and galtha – the place-moment of connection between ancestral realities and contemporary performances.

This led to some discussion on the work of trying to get the key analytics to emerge from Yolŋu thinking, talking and writing, and our work of recording, transcribing, translating and making close reading of the reflections of Yolŋu co-researchers. I showed a couple of examples, one called ‘Garmak Gularri’ about the spring-water from Garmgulkpuy’s ancestral land swelling up through the land each wet season, and knowing where it needs to go to get to the sea, solving, cleaning and freshening as it goes along – a special role for her Wangurri clan group.

(So there is an important epistemological distinction between on the one hand, how you, on your own land, learn who you are and what you must do – as a matter of identity between land and people and the forms of their language – and on the other, the sorts of negotiations which need to take place for the production and assessment of truth claims in an intercultural context like a garma where different languages and perspectives from different embodiments in land need to be carefully woven together and attention paid to sameness and difference in the process.)

The talk about garma introduced the poster and I talked about the history of our work with Yolŋu – starting at Yirrkala. I moved to Yirrkala in the mid 80s after having spent years as a linguist at Milngimbi a bit further west. We talked about the development of the Yolŋu Studies program (www.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies) at CDU, and the way in which the curriculum developed in response to Yolŋu protocols for knowledge work, and Yolŋu epistemology. Our first major collaboration with Yolŋu in a knowledge project was in a project called Indigenous Knowledge and Resource Management in Northern Australia IKRMNA (www.cdu.edu.au/ik) looking at the emerging Yolŋu uses of digital technology in knowledge work. I found Geoff and Leigh’s work very useful for certain aspects of that work. I mentioned other research work I’d been involved in where the centrality of Yolŋu theory and method made significant difference to the work. One was the research into communication breakdown between medical practitioners and Yolŋu patients and their families in the renal unit where we worked on Yolŋu definitions of communication as ‘building shared understanding’, another was to do with the experience of Yolŋu ‘longgrassers’ who sleep under the stars in Darwin, and are considered by many to be a social problem. Various small research-consultancy projects had led us to set up an informal group of Yolŋu bicultural co-researchers as the ‘Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative’ (www.cdu.edu.au/yaci).

• *Temporality-place. The poster evoked talk of place as ‘clotted-temporality’ (my term). Paul came up with a question to do with the temporalities of teaching—which I regretted later that I didn’t write down. Was it something like ‘How are people embedded in the gradual sedimentation of time in other places as in the Darwin classroom, or the Japanese external student’s home - drawn into the sedimenting time of the place of the Yolŋu teacher – out ‘on country’ with ‘live coverage’? Whatever the question, the image of place as an on-going spatio-temporal mesh—which I imagine as an on-going clotting, which requires serious work to hold it together - emerged for me at least.*

• *‘Live coverage’. An English term that Yinjiya and his wife came up with to name what they saw as the crucial benefit of the TFC approach—places can ‘speak for themselves’ through the bodies of teachers in-place. A discussion of the tunnel vision as what the technics enable—no sounds, no smells, no bodily feelings—eg of the wind, while appearing to provide an experiential basis. It is experiential for the teacher and for Yinjiya that’s what matters—the authority of place. But teachers need to understand the experiential deficits of the distant learners. It’s going to be tough (technically), but we hope soon that we can get the Yolŋu to actually try the remote teaching and reflect on it in a way which goes beyond the theoretical statements which they have made so far. If it is an improvement on current practice, then how exactly is it an improvement. There was never any doubt on the part of the Yolŋu advisers to the university (who are pretty much the same group as our*

co-researchers) that a justifiable pedagogy of Yolŋu language and culture could be set up on someone else's traditional land (in Darwin), but this project may help people to articulate its limitations more clearly.

- Leigh raised the notion of Commitment to a shared fate. Can (and should) technically mediated teaching-learning effect a commitment to a shared fate? Tied up with the ways Yolŋu use kin placement to engage students—crucially with each other, by adopting them in differing relations. One aim of Yolŋu teachers is that students leave with a changed sense of themselves—not necessarily a life-long commitment-connection to Yolŋu interests... *I talked about the notion of respect which comes up so often in Yolŋu discussions of education as maybe a Yolŋu way of talking about the same thing, talking about the example of the consultancy evaluating a financial literacy project in Yolŋu communities, and the significance of trust and good will as epistemic criteria for assessing the truthfulness of the consultancy.*

Dhāngal is very specific in her statement (which the others haven't seen yet, sorry) that a key purpose of remote Yolŋu teaching of Yolŋu language and culture the Yolŋu way is to help the Balanda (nonIndigenous) students understand who they (the students) really are.

- Opening rituals and protocols for each session; the problems of 'approach'? The difference between visuals and audio in any opening up. *The difference between rituals and protocols. It will be interesting to pay attention to this. The way groups arrive at a garma, the way they dance their people into position from particular directions according to protocols and ritual are all finely tuned. Does this have/need a classroom analogue?*

- Technical matters. Problems of connectivity. Latency, bandwidth, dropping out. What's taken off like a rocket is 'talk on the phone and look at my website'—but Michael is keen to not promote that. *We came up with some good alternative software ideas in the IKRMNA project, and we want to keep looking for good sociotechnical configurations. The remote screen sharing is the best – particularly since Google-earth is such a great stimulus of knowledge work. The websites will be become static. And the teaching will become formulaic. It needs to stay 'crispy'. Yijiya, the Yolŋu lecturer in Darwin, who is probably the most keen and consistent computer user of all the co-researchers, is very keen on making PowerPoint presentations, but has also made some short videos which he edited himself, and put them up on YouTube. You can find a link to one of them under the Yolŋu resources section of the tfc website.*

- Imagining the project as flows: of digital objects, flows of words, flows of banknotes, chains of delegation and accountability. Keeping things crispy, keeping things messy and complex, but also making some things to keep flowing smoothly and staying on the lookout for assemblages which seem to 'work' (or don't seem to) and think about these in terms of where to next? We want some robust solutions that will allow the tension between messy/smooth.

- Katie: found it difficult to see those white people and the work they do; how exactly does the white support come into the TFC, YACI and other programmes? The central role of the high-visibility Yolŋu studies programme; taking it into research in IKRMNA etc. How are the narratives of what these programs are negotiated? *Talking about the ways in which in some situations (especially in traditional academic research) the contributions of Aboriginal people are rendered almost invisible (Garygulkpuy is worried about the invisibility of her Yolŋu yalu research centre in some of the medical research) and in other situations the contributions of the Balanda researchers are rendered almost invisible – to shore up the claims to authenticity of the Yolŋu claims? It is on the basis of these discussions that we have decided to put links from the TFC website to the Yolŋu consultants' website (YACI) and to include on the YACI website (www.cdu.edu.au/yaci) a new tab which includes information on: 1. the history of the collaboration, 2. the mechanics of the consultancies (winning funding, planning, communication, pulling a team together for each project, reporting, ethics, payments), 3. The methodology which has developed, and 4. Our exploration of*

the philosophical issues which the work entails – which is in effect the research side of the consultancy.

- Extended seminar: second half of June-July; conference calls each month? *I'll work on that and prepare some notes for the first phone hook-up.*
- email reminder for blog;
- Possible technics: 'dimdim'
- *I have an ongoing concern about how best to help our international (and Australian) friends see, understand and participate in some of the philosophical work which emerges from what the Yolngu researchers have to say in their own languages. I think it's an interesting part of Helen's ontics, but Yolngu texts are hard to make accessible, they are saturated with meaning. We've tried the three column approach to translation (transcription, close translation, free translation) and we're trying to do some concentrated work on particular words. I will prepare some texts which go with the poster and send them to you. I hope you will have some questions that will help us to focus on interesting ideas which emerge. I hope we can plan for a couple of small intensive philosophical 'workshops' in July – just a few Balanda talking to a few Yolngu (in English) about some key Yolngu ideas.*

Thanks again. Looking forward to the first hook-up.

Notes sent to Paul after our dinner in Long Beach.

I will try to talk to some of our Yolngu co-researchers about their take on viewing space and place and temporalities through digital technology.

With regard to the questions you raised in Santa Clara. I think an iterative process towards designing the question is a good place to start. As I understand it after last night, the first question was to do with the notion of garma: It seems like it's both a place and an event. The event involves suspending some assumptions about place (ie the identity between you and your place and its language) in order to negotiate an agreement which transcends that bundle of specificities. And your question is how that process of place-making in the garma has an effect in a virtual classroom – a virtual space. I won't go further on that one for fear of wandering off somewhere. If you get a hold of the Tony Swain book, (*A Place For Strangers*) he does talk about how Aboriginal practice works to prevent time from 'escaping' from place – until a stranger comes along. I'm not sure what Helen thinks about all that.

Your second question from the steak house relates to Leigh's comment about commitment to a shared fate, and your interest in the practice of putting students into kin relations with each other and with their teachers as setting in place a commitment to the possibility of linking place to a past and a future. Okay I'll leave that one too.