



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Community Book Projects: A Case Study of Place-Based Collaborations

Saskia Ebejer

University of Wollongong
sebejer@uow.edu.au

Jaimey Facchin

University of Wollongong
jaimiey@uow.edu.au

Adam Gowen

University of Wollongong
adam.gowen@cucsouthernshoalhaven.edu.au

Abstract

This case study centres on projects instigated by the University of Wollongong's Batemans Bay campus which engaged other community entities in collaboration to produce a cultural and educational resource in book form. These projects occurred between 2017 and 2019 with more planned for the future. While this work is not a how-to guide, the analysis contained within will allow a broad application of principles in other contexts to increase community engagement and collaboration. The broad principles for success of such projects are identified as Place, Relationships, and Communication. These key elements are evaluated from a researcher/participant perspective and the inter-play between these crucial elements in an educational framework is described as Nourishing Pedagogy. The conceptualisation of Country as Teacher, a framework in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can learn from Country, was a crucial element as the On Country Learning (OCL) experiences were the primary sites where the Nourishing Pedagogy practice was manifest. While there are many factors that contributed to the success of the projects it was clear that the privileging of Aboriginal perspectives and the yielding of institutional power, taking the form of the decampment of institutional buildings for the purpose of participating in the projects, was critical.

Keywords: *collaboration, place, Aboriginal knowledges, education*

Introduction and Background

The University of Wollongong Batemans Bay campus (UOW Batemans Bay) is situated on a regional coastal site that is significant to the local Walbunja Aboriginal community, within the larger Yuin Nation on the South Coast of New South Wales. Over the last 10 years the Batemans Bay campus has been involved in a number of community projects, including the installation of an Interpretive sign on the campus site, a Possum Skin Cloak project, and more recently the book projects, with three local primary schools in the region, all of which have a high population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The book projects have involved a range of stakeholders that include local primary and high schools, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs),

Community Elders, a Cultural Consultant, and local university staff and students. Drawing inspiration from other book projects Australia wide that centre local Aboriginal knowledge, we have published a number of children's books written in both English and language that showcase this knowledge and can be used as teaching and learning tools. This paper will evaluate three of these book projects, Mogo and Mudji, Cullendulla and Commee Nulunga, offering an opportunity for us to reflect on our collaborative processes while also seeking to learn lessons that will assist us in future partnerships. This is not a step-by-step guide to working with Aboriginal communities, it is however a sharing of what we consider the non-negotiable elements of successful collaborations within educational settings.

As the organising team, made up of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal UOW Batemans Bay staff, we undertook a reflective cycle to review the book projects and find the links between each project that provide the most significant learnings. These were organised into case studies based on each book project that wove the literature and experiences together. By doing this we hope to share insights into place-based collaborations, providing guidance to other organisations who may be considering similar ventures.

Method

Case studies allow complex phenomena to be analysed and understood in the context in which they took place (Woodside, 2010, p. 1). They provide the opportunity to revisit events, places and experiences for the purposes of creating deeper insights. The case study approach assists in reviewing the events and processes (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This approach allows us to focus on what actually occurred, how this impacted and to understand the space between the event and the impact. Viewing each element provides us with the opportunity to understand it uniquely, while also acknowledging the links that exist between them.

As part of the reflective and reviewing processes, at the conclusion of each project, the stakeholders were asked to evaluate the project through a participant survey and an informal evaluation meeting. The data collected was then analysed using a thematic approach and common themes identified. Themes such as culture, On-Country, story-telling, collaboration, participation, generations, youth and sharing emerged. From this, three elements, place, relationships and communication were utilised to consolidate and classify the emerging themes.

Furthermore, place, relationships, and communication formed the central foundations of the three case studies which surround each book project, Mogo and Mudji, Cullendulla and Commee Nulunga, as they are important factors for success in working with communities. Vignettes were also extracted from the evaluations to include in this research. As a constructivist and interpretivist approach, Stake (1995) recommends case studies use vignettes—episodes of storytelling—to illustrate aspects of the case and thick descriptions to convey findings.

As researchers we were also participants, hoping to capture our experience of the events (Kearns, 2005). In writing up each case study, we worked together and discussed each project, taking notes and listening actively to the experiences of each, while also reviewing the photographs, related documents, media coverage, and University of Wollongong accolades (Woodside, 2010). In seeking understanding and meaning, the researcher is positioned with participants as a partner in the discovery and generation of knowledge, where both direct interpretations, and categorical or thematic grouping of findings are used (Grbich, 2003).

Discussion

The present study was aimed at identifying and sharing the non-negotiable elements of successful collaboration within an educational setting, with a particular focus on engaging Indigenous communities. As previously indicated, this paper is not intended to provide a step-by-

step guide to collaboration, therefore discussion will focus on the three emergent themes, place, relationships and communication, and provide a background framework only.

Place

The book projects were generated out of a desire for the Batemans Bay campus of the University of Wollongong to engage with our local communities and the Country on which our campus and communities are situated. Engaging with Yuin Country as place, which holds narratives and necessarily involves reciprocation, is a key tenet of Yuin worldviews. Rose (1996, p. 32) supports this positioning in observing that “*knowledge, in all Aboriginal systems of information, is specific to the place and to the people*”. To tap into the knowledge held by Country and perpetuate a nourishing pedagogy,¹ we adopted the positioning proposed by McKnight (2017, p. 59) of “*Country as teacher*” whereby the participants of these projects could explore and develop a “*personal relationship with Yuin Country in order to have a respectful reciprocal professional knowledge relationship*” (McKnight, 2017, p. 246). This is an important principle that could not have been replicated by substituting the On Country Learning (OCL) experience with a classroom-based lesson (Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2018).

This positioning alters the power dynamic whereby Aboriginal knowledge holders are empowered and university and education professionals are obliged to vacate the physical locations of the institutions in which much power is imbued (Dovey, 2015). In stepping off campus and onto a site of cultural significance participants were able to move from a relationship to Country to a relationship *with* Country (Gowen, 2018). One aim of these projects was to educate people within frameworks of Indigenous intelligence, as such it was necessary to reinsert “*people into relationships with and on the land as a mode of education*” (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. ii; Simpson, 2014).

Learnings about Yuin Country, and Yuin culture were made by participants in a way that respected (and continues to respect) Yuin worldview/s so as not to constitute cultural invasion (Freire, 2005). A predominant part of this process involved the centring of Country, not as resource or landscape to be consumed, but as preeminent educator with which to engage in relationship (McKnight, 2017). The process of leading the negotiation of relationship with Country was assumed by various stakeholders across the three projects. These stakeholders were always Traditional Custodians of the places on which the experiences unfolded. This pedagogical design allows for learners to deeply engage with Country in the way Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison (2013, n.p.) encourages:

See the land... the beauty;

Hear the land... the story;

Feel the land... the spirit.

These lead educators are positioned to facilitate this pedagogical experience as they “*hold unique knowledge and knowledge systems which are foundational and fundamentally important to Australia’s intellectual, social and cultural capital*” (Universities Australia, 2017, p. 11).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the significance and role of place in teaching younger generations is paramount (Figure 1). Although these projects could have been developed from the classroom, the impact and significance of being On Country is key to its success. Country is filled with stories from previous generations and it sustains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lives in every aspect.

¹ This terminology brings together Debra Bird Rose’s (1996) concept of nourishing terrains in an educational sphere.

Figure 1: Quote from Budawang Elder on the Purpose and Importance of Place

COMMEE NULUNGA

Most importantly we hope you walk away with a new found respect for this ancient culture.

[F]or thousands of years the old people's footprints trod gently on this land and everything they needed was here. - Budawang Elder

Relationships

Mindful of Chris Sarra's (2013, p. 340) mantra: "*doing things 'with' people, not 'to' them*", a renewal of relationships was hoped for through the book projects. The projects provided an opportunity to reinvigorate our relationships with the various communities involved by facilitating opportunities for Traditional Custodians to lead in knowledge sharing.

Relationships are often fraught with challenges (Wright et al., 2012). These include the time it takes to develop strong, sustainable ones, the power structures, the decision-making and clarity of priorities. For each of the book projects, the multifaceted partnerships were unique and developed their own dynamics. The stakeholders were involved differently, and directed or stepped back dependent on the context in which the project took place. University staff were certainly mindful of how crucial relationships with community were developing, but were also aware of the relationships within communities (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). In particular those who can speak and share knowledge of sites and practices.

The complex systems that are the relationships within communities incorporate Country, kinship and local knowledge. With such diverse range of involvement it was difficult at times to know who was organising, directing and communicating the project outcomes and logistics across participants, however all the while understanding that the relationships would help navigate the challenging path ahead. As Wright et al. (2012, p. 42) state "*These encounters are not 'knowable' in the conventional sense; rather, they constitute the actual production of knowledge*".

These relationships are local relationships that involve university staff, school students and communities, all participants having a vested interest in the local area. For example, for Mogo and Mudji, the Land Council played an integral part in each facet of the project. Working together helped to develop a strong sense of what Yuin Country means to non-Aboriginal participants (McKnight, 2017). This place specificity contributed to the project's success as it allowed the development of trust and sharing of knowledge over time. The site visit provided an opportunity to share the experience (Figure 2) while incorporating many levels of involvement in the day's activities. This openness of having extended community present, enriched the enjoyment and engagement of participants.

Figure 2: Quote from Mogo Local Aboriginal Lands Council

MOGO and MUDJI

We finished off the day with everyone participating in a dance which we believe had not been done for well over one hundred years. It was a spiritual healing experience... the young ones from all walks of life coming together and sharing in this amazing experience. - Ranger (MLALC)

Communication

Effective communication is an essential component of any collaborative project work. The success of this project relied heavily on strong, clear and respectful communication between all stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on the communication practices of the Project Officer. Employed by the university, the Project Officer was integral to the success of all three projects as they were the liaison between all stakeholders involved. To achieve effective communication, it was crucial that the Project Officer took the time at the beginning of the project, to build an authentic two-way relationship with stakeholders, definitively understand their objectives and acknowledge the collaborative ownership of the project. This approach emphasises the work conducted by Dr Janet Hunt (2013), which acknowledges that meaningful engagement, clarity around the purpose and effective communication creates a multi-layered approach which presents the opportunity to co-create with Community.

When working with Community it was important to first identify and prioritise the Community's needs. Each school was given space to articulate their aspirations for the project. Out of this articulation a space opened for Aboriginal participants to assume a generative role. Whilst this approach was critical to the success of all three projects, each project required the Project Officer to reflect and adapt the way they communicated with the stakeholders such as face-to-face or via digital communication. This adaptation coincides with Giles et al. (1991) theory on communication accommodation that situates adaptive strategies as paramount to successful partnerships. By adapting their communication style, the Project Officer was able to negotiate mutually beneficial partnerships with schools, Local Aboriginal Lands Councils, Community and businesses.

Whilst negotiating mutually beneficial partnerships with all stakeholders was one of the biggest successes of the project, it was not without its challenges. Yawuru man and academic Mick Dodson (2007) adds that one of the key elements of every successful model of Aboriginal education is "*intense Community involvement*" (p. 4).

As each project was unique, each required a different, more tailored communicative response when engaging community. For project one, communication with the Indigenous Community and Local Aboriginal Land Council was channelled through the school. This was a strength of the project as it further developed existing relationships (Figure 3). For the Cullendulla Project, communication focused heavily on engaging a local Aboriginal Cultural Consultant. Whilst this allowed for a rich cultural experience for the students, the level of wider Community involvement varied. For Commee Nulunga, a broad range of communication challenges existed. Identifying the key contact amongst the stakeholders proved to be difficult as this project was the largest and had multiple stakeholders, which made the process of communication a dynamic evolution.

Figure 3: Quote from Principal of Participating School

MOGO and MUDJI

...UOW Batemans Bay's success with other Indigenous projects ensures that they are best placed to work with a vast array of stakeholders, in an appropriate and respectful way. - Principal

Communication between key stakeholders was important for all three projects, but communication between those sharing the stories of place (Elders, Cultural Consultants, Community members) and those creating the books (the school children) was crucial. Children aged 5 years to 12 years old participated in these projects and were tasked with listening to members of the Aboriginal community share the significance of places such as Grandfathers Gully (Mogo and Mudji), Cullendulla Camp Ground (Cullendulla) and Commee Nulunga, and then using their own drawings and language to recreate these stories. Below are three examples (Figure 4,

Figure 5 and Figure 6) of how students' used images (their drawings) and language to communicate the stories they were told by Elders.

Figure 4: Excerpt from Cullendulla Book (Child Aged 7 years)

**Warigala
gwiyala
dhabaga
waraawaradha.**



Mullet and stingray are caught on fishing lines.

Figure 5: Excerpt from Mogo and Mudji (Child Aged 11 Years)

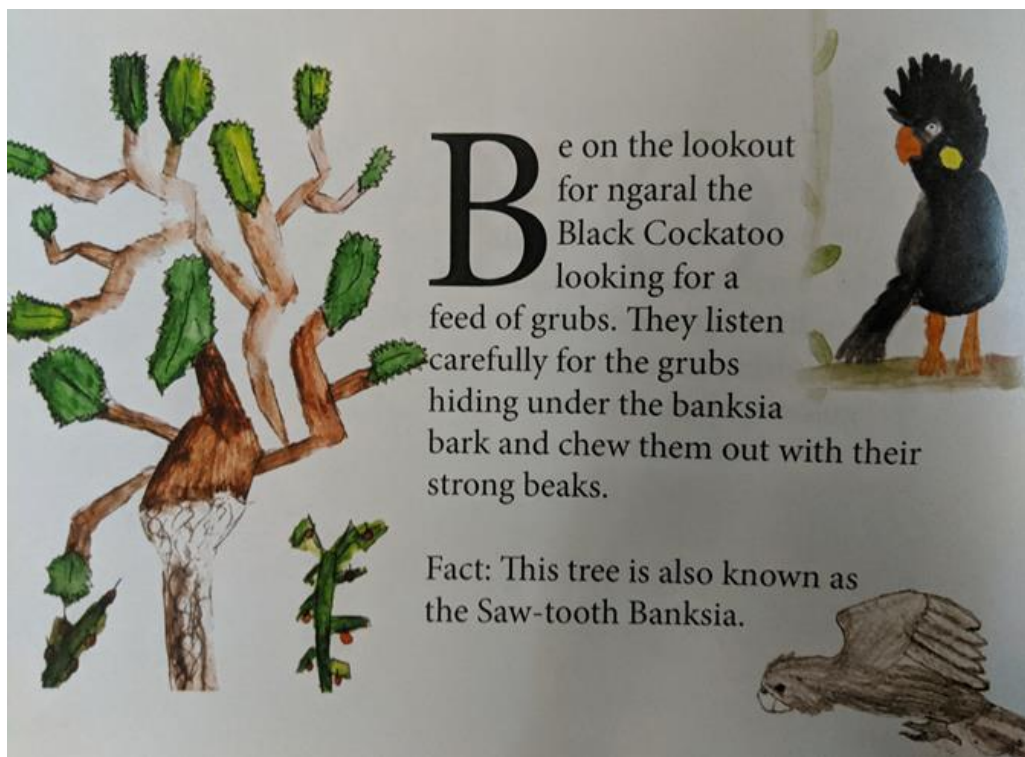
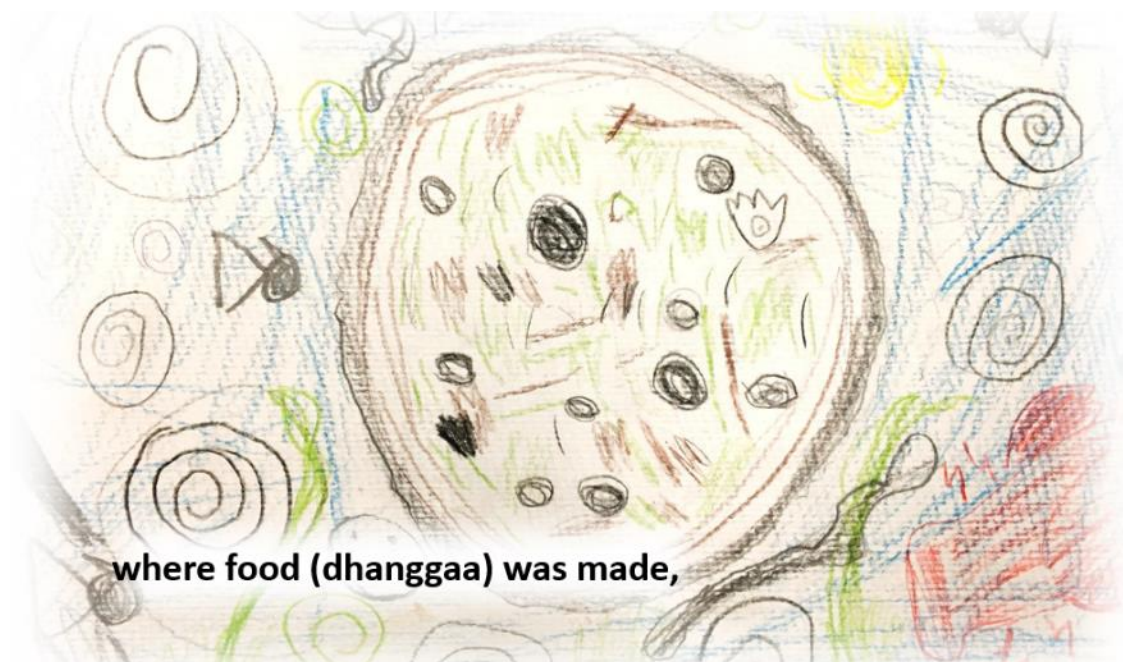


Figure 6: Excerpt from *Mogo and Mudji* (Child Aged 5 Years)



Conclusion

The key to fruitful collaborations is a centring of place, relationships and communication. For the success of our book projects these were the non-negotiable elements that underpinned our partnerships with schools and communities. The case studies discussed allowed us as both participants and stakeholders to journey through the project events and revisit those aspects of importance to the project-place, relationships and communication. We do not offer a road map of clear and defined steps and instructions for working with communities, we do however offer a framework for collaborations that are respectful and centre knowledge of Country. For us, the opportunity to step outside of our teaching environment and experience being a student On Country allows an inversion of power structures and knowledge systems. This contributed to the renewal of the relationships and has opened up opportunities for future collaborations. Perhaps even hint at future book projects already begun or in the pipeline?

References

- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss4/2>
- Dodson, M. (June 2007). *Whatever happened to reconciliation* [Lecture]. Retrieved from The Public Lecture Series <https://ninglunbooks.files.wordpress.com/2008/01/whatever-happened-to-reconciliation.pdf>
- Dovey, K. (2015). *Becoming places: Urbanism/architecture/identity/power*. Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. 30th Anniversary ed. Continuum International Group.
- Giles, H., Coupland, J., & Coupland, N. (1991). *Contexts of accommodation: developments in applied sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Gowen, A. (2018). *Look what the tide brought in: Sovereignty, settler colonialism, and Aboriginal identity* (Honours thesis, Faculty of Law, Humanities, and the Arts, University of Wollongong).
- Grbich, C., (2003). *New approaches in social research*. Emerald publishing.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209519>
- Harrison, M. D. (2013). *My peoples dreaming*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Harrison, N., & Greenfield, M. (2011). Relationship to place: positioning Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in classroom pedagogies, *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(1), 65–76.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.536513>
- Hunt, J. (2013). Engagement with Indigenous communities in key sectors. Resource sheet no. 23. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. AIHW cat. no. IHW 105. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/c3d74d39-oded-4196-b221-cc4240d8ec90/ctgc-rs23.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- Jackson-Barrett, E. M., & Lee-Hammond, L. (2018). Strengthening identities and involvement of Aboriginal children through learning on country. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(6). <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3745&context=ajte>
- Kearns, R. A. (2005). Chapter 12: Knowing seeing? Undertaking observational research. In I. Hay, (Ed.) *Qualitative Research methods in human geography* (pp. 192–206). Oxford University Press.
- McKnight, A. (2017). *Singing up Country in academia: teacher education academics and preservice teachers' experience with Yuin Country* (Doctor of Philosophy thesis, School of Education, University of Wollongong). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/72>
- Rose, D.B. (1996), *Nourishing terrains : Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness/ Deborah Bird Rose*. Australian Heritage Commission.
- Simpson, A. (2014), *Mohawk Interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler States*. Duke University Press.
- Sarra, C. (2013). *Good Morning, Mr Sarra: My life working for a stronger, smarter future for our children*. University of Queensland Press.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Universities Australia. (2017). Indigenous strategy 2017-2020.
<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Indigenous-Strategy-v16-1.pdf>
- Wildcat, M., McDonald, M., Irlbacher-Fox, S., & Coulthard, G. (2014). Learning from the land: Indigenous land based pedagogy and decolonization. *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), i–xv.
<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/wildcat-et-al-2014.pdf>
- Woodside, A. G. (2010). *Case study research theory, methods, practice* / Arch G. Woodside (1st ed.). Emerald Group Pub. Ltd.

Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Suchet-Pearson, S., Burarrwanga, L., Tofa, M., & Country, B. (2012) Telling stories in, through and with country: Engaging with Indigenous and more-than-human methodologies at Bawaka. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 29(1), 39–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2012.646890>