

Case Study 4: Deniliquin – learning ecology in action

Introduction

This case study draws on the experience and knowledge through a partnership between Riverina Institute of TAFE NSW and the Wamba Wamba Indigenous Community in Deniliquin in southern NSW. The process of relationship development and community growth links to the concepts of learning ecologies and life based learning in the research project Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era. In preparing this case study it is important to acknowledge that our work takes place on the traditional lands of the Wamba Wamba and Perrapa Perrapa nations and that we give respect and acknowledgement to elders of those communities, both past and present.

When considering learning in the Knowledge Era and the concept of learning ecologies we can begin to see a connection to traditional community learning. While we can appreciate the individual, their experience and connections, this case study indicates that we need to also appreciate the community in which they belong. Increasingly we have identified the effectiveness of shared stories and experiences that are constantly reinforced within the community. The need to retell these stories is a primary method of maintaining connection and, in this case, a continuation of thousands of years of oral tradition.

Working with Indigenous learners and following the pathway taken in this case study reveal that these oral traditions, their connection to country and stories, have been a constant part of the process.

During the course of this project three main principles have been identified;

- **Community Control** – this relates to the process of negotiating course content and delivery with the community involved in the project. It is more than consultation and needs to remain flexible in response to changing conditions. Community control also relates to the selection of appropriate teachers and facilitators who must also meet TAFE requirements, i.e. AQTF, curriculum and teacher qualification requirements.
- **Communal learning** – where the learning environment encourages group learning and supports and welcomes the involvement of all members of the Indigenous community.
- **Cultural responsibility** – working with the Indigenous community requires the learning environment to complement and accommodate cultural responsibilities.

Context

This Project commenced in late 2001 and has developed through a number of stages. Key events are presented in a table at the end of this case study. The major partners in this project are:

- the local Indigenous community who as well as participating in the project also provide guidance and advice on the direction and purpose of the work
- the NSW Department of Natural Resources through the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer who saw the need to increase the capacity of the community to be engaged in natural resource management
- TAFE NSW Riverina Institute, which provided the learning environment as well as committed to becoming involved in the outcomes, and
- Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre and Deniliquin Local Aboriginal Land Council which provided a forum for community issues and endorsement for the project.

There are a number of important points that are worth highlighting:

1. The local Indigenous community initiated this project.
2. The learning institution provided the means to explore new learning and teaching strategies.
3. Continuation of the project relied on the level of trust and respect between the community and the learning institution.
4. Recognition of the project, and the individuals involved, provided important encouragement.

Recognising the role individuals have played in this project, it is also important to recognise that the development of this project occurred within the context of a specific community. While these principles are transferable it is important to consider the following if planning something similar:

- Identify key individuals within a community to develop the outcomes – these may be people not currently engaged in the education sector or in community development but who do have fundamental connections to the relevant community.
- Identify key personnel within the learning institution that can commit the time necessary to build the required trust and respect needed to sustain the process.
- Accept that the process may take considerable time and investment.
- Consider the starting point – different communities have different learning requirements however to develop a culturally appropriate learning process the learning institution must enter into negotiations with the relevant community

Our Process of Learning – A learning ecology in action

This Case Study provides an opportunity to reflect on how the process developed and the impact this has had on both the learning environment and the community. From a perceived need to a continuing momentum of cultural learning we have embarked on a learning journey that has an important role to play in the years to come.

When reflecting on the process we are able to identify some basic principles. While they are not new concepts they are rarely identified in the development period. One of these is **cultural control**. This concept has been explored by Kral and Falk in their study of literacy in Indigenous communities. They state that:

...most training does not fit into the meaning and purpose of community life. The connection between education, vocational education and training and employment pathways is not linked to any future planning process that takes account of community aims and aspirations...the community believes that for education to be successful and to lead to sustainable outcomes, it must be integrated into the social and cultural framework of the community, and must include community goals and aspirations. ..relationships through the kinship system are a crucial, cohesive element in an unchanging authority structure determined by Aboriginal law...⁶

This also acknowledges that the learning is taking place within the whole community — the information gathering in the institution is then brought to the families of the students. When this happens we can be assured that what is occurring is both purposeful and meaningful and connected to community aspirations.

⁶ Ingle Kral and Ian Falk – What is all that learning for? Indigenous adult English literacy practices, training, community capacity and health, NCVET June 2004

Clear examples of this include the initial work around language, which has resulted in an increase in the use of Wamba Wamba words by the children in the community and the request to develop local curriculum material for the schools in the area.

The second major principle is of **communal learning** – where the learning environment encourages group learning and support and welcomes the involvement of members of the Indigenous community. This requires the development of flexible teaching strategies that can satisfy the increasingly regulated assessment process while accepting the need for members of the community to be involved in the courses at different levels and at different times. This becomes increasingly difficult when involving teaching staff from other sections who have timetable constraints. It remains crucial that there be a linking of subject areas. This also results in some units taking longer than their nominal hours to work through. By utilising the role of facilitator to coordinate and track across units, continuity can be maintained throughout the project.

A further consideration is the implications of the relationships between students. Generally this project has involved members of the same family group. This results in learning continuing over breaks and outside class times as well as reaching other members of the families. The teacher then needs to accommodate the unpredictable nature of these events, work within the circumstances that develop and be able to interact with the extended families of the enrolled students.



Members of the 2004 class

The third major principle is **cultural responsibility**. Working with the Indigenous community requires the learning environment to complement and accommodate cultural responsibilities. This includes assisting in dealing with sorry business (associated with a death in the community), attending and being involved in community meetings, providing a venue for cultural activities (meetings, visits etc) and realising that the need to deal with cultural business takes precedence over evidence collection to satisfy unit assessment. An important cultural event concerned with the return of stolen human remains occurred during 2005. It was accepted without question that this event would take precedence over all other business.



Drawing on the experiences of a range of people associated with this project we believe that these three principles are generally applicable to community development programs involving Indigenous communities. It must be stressed that individual members of the community have, and do, work within the existing learning structures very successfully, although they will, from time to time, feel the conflict between community business and the learning environment.

Accommodating these aspects into the learning environment requires a high degree of flexibility and acknowledgement of how interconnected the learning is to the reality of life. There has been a need to incorporate a range of subjects within the course structures to allow an holistic and responsive approach that cannot be predetermined. There have been a number of occasions where classes have taken a completely different direction than that prescribed in a lesson plan. The choice is whether to stop this natural momentum or follow it through while also connecting the activity to learning outcomes.

Not all teachers can work in this unpredictable environment. This is particularly the case when so many teachers are part-time and have very little flexibility. It has worked for our project due to the role of the course facilitator who can track the progress of every student and develop adaptive techniques to achieve required results. As well as complying with TAFE requirements, the selection of the facilitator should also be undertaken in line with local cultural protocols.

We need to be able to react not only to community responsibilities but also to emerging issues in government policy and programs. There have been many occasions where we have attended meetings as a group and there have been equally as many times when issues have been brought to us for consideration. In addition we must be aware of the individual's requirements for support and encouragement as they deal with family and community responsibilities and educational challenges.

Key components of the project

1. Incorporate cultural control, community learning and cultural business into the learning and teaching environment.
2. Develop appropriate teaching styles to reflect local conditions – required acceptance of (and trust in) the community's role in selecting facilitators.
3. Integrate applications into the learning environment – the establishment of Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre as a result of the learning process indicates a high correlation between theory and application.
4. Establish and maintain appropriate organisational support. The process requires large time and resource commitments from a range of agencies. It is vital that these same agencies then integrate the outcomes into their business.
5. Provide multiple pathways, entry and exit points – teaching in a life based learning process requires acceptance of members of the community joining the learning process at different times. It is important to develop strategies to enhance the learning environment for all participants.
6. Increasing engagement of teaching staff through professional development and then utilising those skills in the learning environment. In the Nyaka Aboriginal Cultural Education package that was delivered to 16 members of TAFE NSW, Riverina Institute indicates the development of the relationship and the merging of the teacher/learner roles.
7. Trust and support local communities to identify and develop local strategies and pathways – each community has a different history and different responses. In the early stages of the program the process of learning was through skill development and facilitated through relevant cultural activities. This could not have worked without the involvement of the students and the community in the design of the program.
8. The process of learning can be repetitive. So can some of the content, however it is important to repeat the process of working within the cultural and historical context of the community. In addition mechanisms for learning between professionals and communities need to be further developed to ensure that the process is both active and alive.
9. Selection of appropriate staff – selection of teachers and facilitators is a crucial part of the process and must take into consideration the connection with the relevant community.
10. Recognition through the learning institution, the community and through the professional network. The Deniliquin program has resulted in recognition on a number of levels.
 - (i) One student named Campus Student of the Year 2005
 - (ii) Program teacher awarded an Excellence in Teaching Award 2005
 - (iii) Current project receiving a Bronze Award in the 2005 NSW Premier's Public Sector Awards
 - (iv) NSW Department of Natural Resources staff recognition certificate
 - (v) Winner 2004 and 2005 Deniliquin Business Awards – Innovative contribution from the Indigenous Community

Personal and Professional growth

The development during the past four years has opened up many opportunities for individual members of the community and the community as a whole. These include:

- **Greater interaction with government agencies** demonstrated by the development of the Werkitya Kapal Deniliquin Council Indigenous Advisory Committee, membership of the Murray and Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations group, membership of Deniliquin Council Tourism Advisory Committee, membership of NSW Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre and involvement in Reconciliation activities.

- **Relationships with the learning and education sector** – developed through the provision of a cultural education package to local TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute staff (*Nyaka*) and participation in *Werkityap Kuli – Learnscope*, part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. The LearnScope process began with the emphasis on teaching in rural and remote communities. With the increasing number of teachers being involved in working with Indigenous learners it quickly became apparent that there was great interest in learning more about the local Indigenous culture. As the need for more teachers to become involved in the process grew, so too did the need to provide some form of cultural awareness. This need was reflected when the TAFE NSW Riverina Institute placed Aboriginal education as number 1 on their business plan and funded the development and implementation of a local cultural education package.
- **Development of local cultural education program** – developed and delivered by members of the local Wamba Wamba community including the students enrolled at the Deniliquin TAFE Campus. The result was a powerful experience for the participants and the community that has allowed the development of relationships outside of the educational institution. It should also be acknowledged that some of the material presented also was highly emotional and at times confronting. As a result there has been a greater understanding between the Indigenous students, community and TAFE staff.
- **Willingness of professional staff to be involved** – the staff who benefited most from the professional development were those that could see how they could incorporate flexible and open learning into their professional environment. Those who did not see this connection found it more challenging to adapt their own teaching styles to the program.

There has also been an increase in the involvement of TAFE staff at the local Wamba Wamba Cultural Week held each year, the Nyerna Reconciliation Group and in the Werkitya Kalpal Deniliquin Council Indigenous Advisory Committee. It will be important that this involvement continues to occur so that the Institute can continue to assist the community to achieve their aspirations from generation to generation.

- **Traditional form of education** – the realisation that this was not about doing one course or another but that what we are really involved in is ***preparing the coming generation to take their place in fulfilling cultural responsibilities***. Although there have been many changes in technology, lifestyles and landscapes there remains a fundamental connection to cultural identity. This is maintained through kinship, stories, and cultural practices that do not belong to an individual but rather to the whole community.

Relationship between the community and the learning environment

Three principles were identified in the Case Study – ***cultural control, communal learning*** and ***cultural business***. For this program to succeed, it was vital that the learning environment acknowledged these principles. During the initial stages of this project the principles were largely unidentified. While there was a continual desire for the Institute to offer courses for what the community wanted there was little conception of what this meant. Ultimately the Institute was required to trust that what was being said was what was meant and that the method for achieving this was identified.

It was also important to realise that TAFE was the vehicle to work with, not the controller of the program. In the early stages this literally meant pulling a range of modules together and allowing the community to work through the identity strands. The Institute also had to trust the selection of the facilitator. This was a key component of the project. The facilitator was required to match the learning to the TAFE system, co-ordinate the learning activities and link with supporting agencies and the Aboriginal community. At almost the same time the qualifications needed to work in NSW TAFE were changed requiring a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. This effectively precluded members of the local

Aboriginal community from being employed by TAFE. The facilitator or course coordinator was nominated by the Indigenous community and was appointed in late 2001. They later obtained the Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment and later (in 2004) applied for and won the position through the TAFE recruitment process.

The selection of appropriate teachers for a project of this nature requires a consideration of additional qualities including connection to the local community, commitment and capacity to facilitate the program and endorsements by the local Indigenous community.

Role of facilitator

One of the major components of this project is the role of the facilitator to ensure that the requirements of communal learning and cultural responsibility are maintained. This role cannot be undertaken by the program staff but must be filled by qualified and approved members of the community. The selection of the facilitator must take into consideration their connection to the relevant community, their ability and their commitment to be fully involved in a particular project.

Recognition

Ongoing recognition of achievements allows also for the raising of confidence in members of the community engaged in study. This has resulted in opportunities for employment in a range of areas (particularly education). Prior to this project there was little expectation that employment was possible. Recently there is a growing optimism that new employment options will be available.

Increasingly the learning setting has become part of cultural business and therefore involvement in community issues. A long-term presence of the Indigenous class on the local campus created the need for a semi-permanent classroom. To develop this relationship further a more permanent Indigenous learning centre will be required to ensure continued and progressive interaction with the Indigenous community.

Challenges

Requirement for local investment in job creation



Many of the participants combine their study with the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP).

This combination of study and CDEP has varying impacts. Some participants expect no more than these combinations but rely on the provision of courses to continue. Others view the combination as a necessary part of the process. Indeed students that have moved from study to employment often continue to combine paid employment with CDEP. This has the result of dependency on government programs and needs to be moved into full paid employment as quickly as possible.

While economics play a large part in sustaining community activities, simply creating more employment opportunities in existing businesses does not recognise the impact of historical events, particularly in rural areas.

Need for independent funding for employment in cultural business

This case study recognises the role of cultural business as one of the three main components. While this can be accommodated during in the learning environment, and in fact enhances the learning process, there are few resources available to generate sufficient income to support this involvement outside the learning area.

It will be a challenge for the wider community to recognise that cultural business plays a critical role in society and must be accommodated by economic systems.

Exploring new opportunities and learning pathways

If the learning environment becomes part of the cultural landscape, and therefore part of the lives of the community, many more opportunities could be explored. During 2005 this has included Digital Storytelling and cultural education programs.

There is however an immediate challenge ahead as we broaden the application of the project model to explore new pathways. While it is important to allow more members of the community to be involved in these processes, we must also ensure that existing students have an opportunity to follow new pathways. Currently members of the existing group are considering areas in child welfare, business studies and tourism. It will be up to the learning institutions to support these new directions while also providing an appropriate learning environment.

Context

Dates	What took place	Connection to the learning ecology
1999	Appointment of Aboriginal Natural Resource Officer within the Department of Conservation and Land Management employed to increase the engagement of Aboriginal community in natural resource management.	Identified the need to build Indigenous community involvement in environmental issues
2001	Members of the Deniliquin Aboriginal Community were enrolled in Certificates in Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Practices	While providing many opportunities for the community, this course was near completion and new pathways were required.
	Higher teaching qualifications were required by TAFE.	Restriction of using community as teachers
2001	<i>Family Kinship and Identity and Aboriginal Cultural Values.</i>	These modules were also part of mainstream learning and were often challenging when put into a local context. The response to these units from the students and their families was immediate. <i>They wanted to do more but wanted it to be controlled by the local community.</i>
2002	Agreement with the TAFE NSW Riverina Institute Deniliquin Head of Campus.	Course commenced that became a challenge to both the Institution and the community as a whole. The nature of the material being researched had the potential to cause some anxiety and also reveal more about the local history of the area.
	Challenge from the local council to mount an historic photo exhibition to coincide with Reconciliation Week. At the same time opportunities for obtaining resources from sources in Canberra and Sydney would result in several field trips that required the involvement of the campus administration.	All students enrolled in the course participated in this exhibition bringing in family photos that had remained unseen for decades. This was the beginning of a partnership between the Aboriginal community, TAFE NSW, Riverina Institute and Government agencies that would soon become a characteristic of the courses offered in Deniliquin.

Context (continued)

Dates	What took place	Connection to the learning ecology
2003	Aboriginal Coordinator position filled.	Identification of the Site Conservation course
	Additional units were offered in basic computing and horticulture.	Involvement of other TAFE teachers.
	Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation	This organisation has a major role in managing the collected resources, guiding the training process and developing new projects. This began the process of combining different cultural elements – having strengthened the knowledge of local identity we began to explore the range of cultural characteristics including local site types, bush food and medicine plants and their connection to today's society.
2003/04	Certificate II and III in Aboriginal Site Conservation to develop skills in site identification and management	As part of this process we were involved in a cultural heritage assessment of a local burial site which included at least two small children. This was a tremendously emotional experience that brought the connection between the past and the present into perspective.
	Role of language and its position in cultural knowledge	Local language incorporated into learning strategy and resulted in increased usage in the community and increased recognition of local culture.
2005/6	Certificate III and IV Conservation and Land Management (Indigenous Land Management)	Combined in partnership with Forests NSW and NSW Department of Natural Resources in an Environmental Trust funded project in the North Deniliquin State Forest. This partnership was recently recognised with a Bronze Award at the 2005 NSW Premier's Public Sector Awards.
2006	Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre awarded a major contract to increase the capacity of Aboriginal people in environmental, heritage and natural resource management project, from the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs	This project will focus on the Wamba Wamba community in Deniliquin and the Mutti Mutti community in Balranald using the Asset Based Community Development Model