

## Bridging Universities and Indigenous Communities Through Service Learning Projects in Music

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which community service learning projects in music can foster meaningful collaborations between universities and Indigenous communities. Drawing on recent pedagogical literature from the field of community service learning and insights from a three-year partnership between Australian Indigenous musicians at the Winanjjikari Music Centre in Tennant Creek and music students from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, it describes how such service learning projects can facilitate significant intercultural exchanges between students and Indigenous communities. It argues that these partnerships can assist both communities in their cultural activities and provide students with contemporary curricula that transform their understandings of Indigenous culture. As such, it directly addresses the CMA Commission Seminar theme, "Bridging Community Music Environments," by exploring how such services, engagement initiatives and strategies can bridge diverse community music environments and provide important collaborative experiences for all involved.

### Keywords

Community service learning, collaboration, Indigenous music

### Introduction

*As we board the coach for Tennant Creek late one afternoon in June we don't quite know what to expect. We have prepared ourselves for thirty-six hours of travelling and a two-week service learning project at Winanjjikari Music Centre as best we can, but in all honesty we are entering the great unknown. No orientation sessions, books or articles, or words of advice can really prepare us for what lies ahead. The familiar lights of Brisbane fade into the distance as we travel the road northeast to Mt Isa and Camooweal. The landscape starts to change into dry red earth and the late afternoon sun turns the termite mounds a warm orange colour. Just after we pass Cloncurry a dramatic sunset gives way to a stunning night sky of stars. As I lean against the frosted window and watch the outlines of trees flashing past, it occurs to me how unusual this situation is. University courses rarely venture beyond the walls of their institutions like this, and consequently students and Indigenous musicians are seldom given the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with one another. Service learning is such a new concept within Australian higher education it hasn't really been used with Indigenous communities like this before. As I think ahead to our two weeks in Tennant Creek, I am keen to observe what happens when we make such a shift, and exchange our university classroom for an Indigenous community. I am curious to observe what exchange of music and ideas might transpire when students and Indigenous musicians are given the opportunity to spend time with one another and collaborate.*

In the two weeks that followed that grueling bus journey in 2009 the students assisted the Indigenous community of Tennant Creek with a range of tasks. They played music on many occasions with the Indigenous men employed by Winanji-kari Music Centre (mainly rock, country, and original songs written by the men), assisted with the set up of a new Music Centre at the Drover's Hall and undertook a range of recording projects. The students were also involved in songwriting sessions with a local Indigenous woman, Lynette Lewis who worked for the Melbourne-based organisation The Song Room. This involved writing lyrics, chords, making rough recordings and helping her teach and run her holiday program for local school children. Most importantly, the students also undertook daily Warumungu language and culture lessons with Warumungu Elder Rosemary *Narrurlu* Plummer. In 2010 we then returned with another group of students to work at the Desert Harmony Festival and collaborate with local Indigenous artists. During that visit the students worked on diverse a range of projects, including the Mandinka Sound performance and workshop, the Birds of Tennant Creek dramatic production, a major traditional dance event that featured dancers and singers from around the Northern Territory and a festival showcase of local bands from the Barkly Region. In 2011, we returned with a new group of students who worked alongside the Winanji-kari musicians on a range of songwriting and recording projects. Students were also involved in cross-cultural training classes at the Papulu Apparr-Kari Language Centre. As I write this paper in 2012 we are embarking on another trip to work at the Desert Harmony Festival, as part of a national study I'm conducting in collaboration with a team from across Australia (funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching).

To encourage the students to deeply engage with this community service learning process, be observant and self-reflexive throughout the experience, each year we gave them field diaries to record the events of their days and their thoughts, feelings and interpretations of what was going on. We were also keen to allow them to report about the process in a way that is creative, personal, visual, and musical, and thus gave them video cameras to create a digital story of their experiences. After each visit we had a screening of their digital stories so they could share the lessons they learnt with university staff, their peers, family and friends. To monitor how the students were responding to the experience, we also interviewed them individually during each trip, and undertook follow-up interviews to see what lasting impression the learning experience has left on them. We also interviewed staff from Winanji-kari, as well as other community members the students had worked with to find out what impact the project has had on the community. This paper briefly draws on some of the insights that emerged from these interviews, digital stories and field diaries.

### **A brief background to Indigenous music content in Australian higher education**

This project builds on a growing national awareness of the need for better intercultural relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the role that higher education and communities can play in improving this situation. In his 2008 national apology to the Stolen Generations, PM Kevin Rudd spoke about the need to build "a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a bridge based on a real respect rather than a thinly veiled contempt" (Rudd, 2008, p. 3). "Our challenge for the future," suggested Rudd, "is to now cross that bridge and, in so doing, to embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians" (Rudd, 2008, p. 3). Likewise, Australian higher education institutions are beginning to recognise the need to "systemically embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum and acknowledge the scholarly contributions of Indigenous communities in developing a culturally ethical framework to underpin research and learning

(NIHEN, 2009).” This is reflected in my institution’s policy documents: Griffith University is “committed to the creation of a curriculum that is informed by and respects the knowledge systems of our first peoples—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders” (Griffith University, 2011). Griffith’s commitment to the “inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curricula follows an increasing national awareness of the need to incorporate such content into relevant areas of study and the complex and innovative ways in which Universities are approaching this task” (Griffith University, 2006, p. 2).

Despite the endorsement of policies related to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and content across Australian universities, within many disciplines such as music, the incorporation of these Indigenous perspectives is still minimal. While some educators have brought Indigenous artists into performing arts classrooms (see for example Bartleet, 2010, 2011; Mackinlay, 2005), in many cases the inclusion of Indigenous curriculum content is presented in a somewhat tokenistic and abstract manner, removed from the lived experience of Indigenous culture (Newsome 1999). Such an approach is highly problematic in music education for a number of complex reasons. As Mackinlay & Dunbar-Hall (2003, pp. 38-39) explain: “The teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musics in sectors of Australian music education is not the simple task of inclusion that government directives, syllabus expectations and ideological agendas can imply [...]. To teach Indigenous musics is also to teach the historical, social and political contexts in which they exist, to raise debates over the efficacy of the pedagogic act, and to uncover the dialectic and musical tensions that surround it.” These significant cultural, political and pedagogical tensions are a common concern for those responsible for delivering music curricula to the large number of undergraduate students in Australia (Dunbar-Hall, 2002). This situation presents a pressing need for new strategies and approaches for the inclusion of Indigenous content in tertiary curricula, which are built on respectful and culturally appropriate interactions with Indigenous communities.

The service learning approach used in this project specifically addresses this need for innovative and more effective pedagogical approaches to the inclusion of Indigenous content in higher education. Such an approach not only supports Indigenous communities through projects of cultural significance to them, but also deepens students’ intercultural understandings. It also builds on a considerable body of international literature that demonstrates the effectiveness of service learning: for promoting community awareness among students (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Forte, 1997); enabling exposure to real-world contexts, leading to “better retention and application of course content” (Chupp & Joseph, 2010, p. 192); facilitating social problem-solving by meeting community needs (Boyer, 1994); deepening students’ “moral and civic values” (Chupp & Joseph, 2010, p. 192); expanding students’ disciplinary knowledge (Swords & Kiely, 2010); and assisting students to develop intercultural competence and the ability to interact with various cultural groups (Flannery & Ward, 1999). This is shown in one of the students Cody’s reflections:

I have grown so very much as a person. I could go as far as saying that I learnt just as much in 12 days in Tennant Creek as I have in 3 years of university. [...] Tennant Creek is not just a place, it’s a life changing experience, and everybody who has been there will say the same thing. [...] I went there thinking that the community would really learn from someone different coming into their community, but I left learning a lot more from them instead! [...] Truly a once in a life time experience and something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life (Cody, field diary, 2010).

### Developing students' understandings of Indigenous culture and communities

With every trip, the students soon came to realise they were no longer in a task-oriented university classroom, where assessment targets needed to be accomplished at the expense of all else. Relationship building and task sharing had to be prioritised if the students hoped to accomplish anything. As the project progressed with each visit, I noticed a change in the student's rhythm. I could see them come to realise the importance of showing respect, developing trust, sharing the load, and taking the time to build connections properly. One of the students, James reveals this understanding in his field diary:

At times it has felt like things have been moving quite slowly and we might not be achieving as much as was expected of us. However upon reflecting on our first week I have realised some of this slow-going has actually been a necessary and ideal way to settle in to the new environment, acclimatise and become familiar with who we are working with. We have begun to make a whole new series of contacts around town and actually built a very solid foundation from which to work off for the second week. I don't think it would have been advisable for us as guests in a new environment to begin in any other way. [...] Taking the time to acclimatise and allow the people of Tennant Creek a chance to get to know us and feel comfortable with us in their town has been a very necessary aspect of this trip (James, field diary, 2009).

This initial jarring of different agendas, which James' fieldwork diary alludes to, is something researchers and musicians working in other cross-cultural collaborations have often spoken about (Barney & Solomon, 2009; Haig-Brown, 2001; Mackinlay 2008; Selby, 2004; Somerville & Perkins, 2003). There seem to be no set ways of aligning these agendas. As Katelyn Barney and Lexine Solomon (2009) explain, it is something that needs to be continually negotiated (p. 213). Each year I noticed this negotiation happening in small, but significant ways. I noticed the students getting up to jam with the musicians and the warm ways in which they communicated with one another musically. There was little fanfare or explanation given in these interactions, but I could see this relationship building and personal negotiation provided a powerful learning experience.

As I watched the daily interactions at the Music Centre unfold with every trip, it also became apparent that race was a spectre that could not be ignored. In the Music Centre, and indeed anywhere we travelled in town, our race was made visible to us. We could not hide our glaringly White faces in the sea of Indigenous faces we saw every day. We are forced to not only acknowledge it, and reflect on it, but have a dialogue with it. In her field diary, one of the students Rhiannon describes the foreign nature of this feeling: "It's just strange to think I'm still in my home country, it doesn't feel like it" (Rhiannon, field diary, June 2009). It seems in some respects, the students had become the Other. This resonates with the words of Giroux when he speaks about the social, political and cultural insights that come not from undertaking the "patronizing notion of understanding the Other," but rather understanding "how the self is implicated in the construction of Otherness" (Giroux, 1992, p. 32). This acknowledgement of our racial subjectivities and how we are implicated in this construction of Otherness also meant that we could not possibly shy away from the complexities and devastation that colonisation has caused our Indigenous peoples. This was not lost on some of the students. As Lecia describes in her field diary at the beginning of the trip: "The aboriginals were surviving fine and well before the whites came and either slaughtered them or led them in the so called, 'right direction.' It is our history that makes me wonder whether

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these people will even want us here or our help now" (Lecia, field diary, June 2009). In this setting, there was nowhere to hide from such issues.

As these interactions allude, this community service learning project situates its understanding of culture (and thus intercultural learning and teaching experiences) in critical theories of difference and diversity (e.g. Carrington & Saggars, 2008; DePalma, 2008). These approaches build on socio-cultural understandings of "whiteness" and other critical constructions of race to explore "alternative possibilities to the forces of colonisation" by recognising and reconceptualising categories which maintain borders (e.g. Indigenous/non-Indigenous) (Giroux, 1992); and questioning what is culturally appropriate in particular contexts at particular times (Moreton Robinson, 2004; Nakata & Nakata, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Service learning is a pedagogical approach which steps outside the traditional classroom to enable such intercultural experiences to occur. As in the case of this project, the learning and teaching activities often occur in "space[s] no longer controlled by ... conventions of Western academic discourse" (Mackinlay, 2008, p. 258), enabling students to critically question the positioning of the university and of academic discourse in society more broadly.

## Conclusions

*Our final day in Tennant Creek has arrived. After throwing the last of our bags into the two troupe carriers we pull out onto the main road. As we pass the last of the town buildings and hit the open road, I start to feel a pang inside. I am sad to be leaving. As I watch the termite mounds flash by, my mind begins to wonder and think about what we've just experienced since that long journey to Tennant Creek two weeks ago. It honestly feels like it has been a lifetime. During this trip I was keen to observe what happens when we exchange our university classroom for an Indigenous community. I discovered that new learning spaces are opened up where the centrality of relationship building is crucial. Without these relationships, the perils of our colonial past paralyse us, and the possibilities of our interactions amount to nothing. I watched firsthand the realisations that came from understanding more about our own racial subjectivities and our role in the construction of Otherness. I was also keen to understand what happens when pedagogical practices are placed into the hands of Indigenous musicians. We all learnt how indigenous ways of knowing and learning can be privileged through this process, and the multitude of new insights that this brings. I was curious to observe what exchange of music and ideas might transpire when students and Indigenous musicians are given the opportunity to spend time together and collaborate, and discovered the sense of openness there is to such endeavours when people are given the time and opportunity to work together.*

Community service learning can thus be seen as a useful means of enabling students to engage with *real* versus *imagined* subjects (Tamisari, 2000, p. 276), and to experience ideology in their own lived experience. In recent years, the service learning approach has also been recognised not just for its benefits for learning and teaching within the university context, but also for its ability to contribute towards significant social change agendas (e.g. Clayton et al, 2010; Carrington & Saggars, 2008). This is echoed in one of the students, Mitch's reflections:

*In learning about other people's culture and musical styles, I felt I learnt more about my own [...]. I saw great value in the cultural exchange that took place, and realised*

that as an urban Australian, I really knew nothing about indigenous culture. I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to take part in such an amazing experience. [...] Culturally, I will be able to take a lot of knowledge back home about the indigenous community, that I otherwise wouldn't have learnt had it not been for this trip (Mitch, field diary, 2010).

Such a comment shows how this pedagogical framework can encourage "more equitable and mutually beneficial relationships between students and community members" (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Moreover, it demonstrates that when "universities give very high priority to actively solving strategic, real world, problems" such as intercultural relationship building with communities, "a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance citizenship, social justice and the public good" (Burkhardt & Hudson, 2008, p. 91). This also works to the benefit of the community, as Alan Murn, Executive Officer of Barkly Regional Arts in Tennant Creek explained:

It's always an illuminating exercise for us out here to view Barkly Arts and Winanjjikari Music Centre activities, programs, initiatives and conditions through fresh eyes and from the moment I gathered you all up at Alice Springs airport and banded up the road 500 km to our country, to the last morning when you were poured exhausted onto the Greyhound at 3am I used your immersion into our zone as a touchstone, a gauge, another window to view ourselves. What I did see immediately is that we were throwing everything at you from day one and demanding of you high levels of resilience, innovation, tolerance, acclimatization, cross-cultural understanding and stamina. Your immersion here has had many dimensions, as does our work here, as does each day, and as each day played out with a new major drama you infused it into your experience and gave back to us an energy and understanding of immeasurable importance (Reflections on the project, 2010).

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