The Australian Journal of
INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

ONGOING CONVERSATIONS *about* ABORIGINAL *and* TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RESEARCH AGENDAS *and* DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

As we move forward with the shaping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research agendas and directions in Australia we are confronted with many issues basic to the beginning of any discipline: the problem of small numbers; the complexity and enormity of the problems; the diversity in the intellectual field; the limited albeit developing expertise; the limited opportunities for intellectual dialogue; and, of course, the absence of resources to build a professional base. The issue of our relative absence from developing academic knowledge traditions over the last two centuries, and our recent entrée to the higher eduction sector, understandably, compounds our beginning point. This paper was the basis of a keynote address at the third Indigenous Researchers' Forum in Melbourne in 2001 and, in the main, is part of an ongoing conversation that speaks to the developing issues.

Beginnings

A good starting place to connect readers to the issues are the dinner speeches made at the second Indigenous Researchers' Forum in Adelaide in 2000 by Prof. Paul Hughes and Prof. Marcia Langton. They both made some very strong points and I think that these are worth revisiting because they provide the basis of what I want to discuss in the rest of the paper.

Prof. Hughes provided us with an entertaining and somewhat self-deprecating overview of the struggle to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education – well the beginning of our education really because little mechanism existed, to speak of, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before the NAEC (National Aboriginal Education Committee) got going in the early 1980s. In his speech he noted that nothing that could be called research, in the formal academic sense, was undertaken by the initial group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who began to deliberate on policy and priorities for Indigenous education. What he spoke of was "conversations" and meetings between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all around the country – the coming together of people to talk about a common issue. He spoke of the importance of that. He also spoke of the dialogue with and to some extent the reliance on non-Indigenous people involved in the process to undertake research. Quite apart from constructing policy direction, what this initial group forged was a community – a community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people dedicated to the task of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives through the process of education. We have all benefited from their efforts and are part of that broadening and growing community – a community within a community, a community for a community.

Prof. Langton spoke to another issue. Her speech focused on the issue of the interface – how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education, knowledge and research interfaces with non-Indigenous higher education, other forms of knowledge and a much broader community of research practice and practitioners. She reminded us of the value and usefulness of knowledge from many traditions, not just

ours. And she spoke personally about how much the mentoring of some non-Indigenous people contributed to providing her with their understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues alongside the knowledge, experience and wisdom of our own elders and contemporaries. She talked about the importance of relationships between the two sets of knowledge-holders. She also reminded us of the reality of our situation: how small a percentage we are of the total population of this country; how even smaller are those that are healthy and able; how even smaller are those who have tertiary educational qualifications; how tiny are the numbers who are actually in positions where they are able to undertake, or direct, or influence research of Indigenous issues or research in Indigenous contexts; and, the part therefore that non-Indigenous people have to continue to play in Indigenous research.

It is to these two things that I want to discuss in this paper: building a sense of community as we go about our research; and, finding our place in what is not just a bounded space within or without the non-Indigenous research community but what is in essence the restructuring of relationships (e.g., relationships between knowledges, practices, systems of thought, experiences and peoples).

Difficult dialogues

I would like to bring in here issues from an article I wrote for the *Higher Education Supplement* of *The Australian* (Nakata, 2001, p. 41). This article was about the difficult dialogue that has to go on between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people working within universities for what is the common goal of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. This dialogue or lack thereof goes on at every level; it's not just the domain of those of us in management or research. Ask any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander undergraduate student who has sat through tutorials where non-Indigenous Australians have discussed Indigenous issues. For many of our students, these discussions are enough to variously make them uncomfortable, make them despair, get them angry, render them silent, push them to withdraw from study or push them to withdraw from interaction with non-Indigenous students, at least with regard to the discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. These are responses that continue as we progress up the levels.

And in this article I discussed the ways we respond on the intellectual and systemic levels. Some of us become separatists, seeking to batten down and conduct our conversations within our own domain, unbounded by the constraints that come from engaging with others. Some devote themselves to engaging with the non-Indigenous domain to the extent that they work for inclusion and cultural appropriateness and recognition within that inclusive framework. In this, they work with the security of their own cultural knowledge and are respected as holders of that knowledge. And some take on that non-Indigenous domain on its own terms in an effort to change the nature of the relationship. To not just preserve or restore or develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and practice but also to build new, productive knowledge that will change relationships, practices, understandings, attitudes and beliefs on both sides of the divide.

This is perhaps a somewhat simplistic and inadequate analysis of our responses. Most of us respond in all three ways to varying degrees and in varying circumstances and that just makes strategic and common sense. But I also made the point in that article that the most difficult dialogue is the one that engages with the non-Indigenous domain on its terms but which seeks to engage in such a way that changes the relationship and the nature of the dialogue. In that process, we cannot just be recognised as "different" and accorded a space on that basis. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person has to be the more complete knower to survive or make headway. It is in the course of this dialogue where we can be most easily dismissed and continually recast to the margins, on their terms. It is a place of risk precisely because it is a conceptual domain and not a structural one. So the difficulty in dialogue is particularly the case in relation to scholarly activity, of which research is a component, as distinct from other aspects of our activity in universities such as organisational and managerial activity. If we think that negotiating the structural and organisational elements of reform and inclusion have been difficult, then prepare yourselves for the next stage in the process – negotiating at the level of academic and scholarly knowledge – where the negotiations are not just with management but also with the elite level of scholars and faculty.

The establishment of the enclave system, which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in universities, is a powerful and effective mechanism that gives us a visible presence in the university system. It has achieved much and is still effective but it is not sufficient. Universities support the enclave, not just because they see it as a good system for us. As well, it can conveniently keep us out of core business, give us a space where they can point and take credit for what they have facilitated on our behalf. It will increasingly however, in these times requiring higher performance, accountability and scrutiny, give them the basis also for blaming us for failure.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, and academics generally in universities, who are trying to embed Indigenous perspectives across the disciplines, who are attempting to make Indigenous issues core business rather than a marginal addition, and who are trying to have their scholarship taken seriously, are having a very difficult time. And they are often operating without the comfort, indeed sometimes with no support, from the enclave or from the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The argument for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education to separate entirely is attractive for good reason; the move to consolidate gains within the enclave system is full of good sense and strategy. But the long-term goal of making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues core to university business is the most difficult business. And it is a necessary business if we are to move forward in a serious and credible way. So the points that both Professor Hughes and Professor Langton made, and those that I made in that article, come together here in this paper ostensibly to progress our ongoing conversations.

The way forward

So, how do we forge ahead in this business, holding together, indeed developing together, a sense of ourselves as a community, as a collective? And how do we do that in a way that respects the diversity within our community, that acknowledges and accepts different approaches and varying agendas and differing attitudes to the non-Indigenous arena? And how do we do that and conduct research that fully engages with and speaks to other research practice that continues to research on our behalf, and produce knowledge and commonsense understandings about us? How do we take our concerns and move them into the centre of academic life in this country?

Moving into the centre of academic life will increasingly rest not on mere political will, not on structural and provisional reform, but on the production of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship – scholarship that, on its own merits, must be credible enough to shift and influence non-Indigenous understandings and production of knowledge about us. Structural reform can only achieve so much. In the long-term, it will be up to us as scholars to produce substantial work that can produce change at the level of knowledge and have our contribution recognised as essential to Australian academic activity.

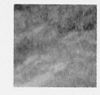
At the Adelaide Forum, we talked about two courses of action to help facilitate the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship:

- producing an academic journal; and,
- forming an association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

The issues have relevance here for how we do both these things. It might help as you follow this conversation to be thinking of the implications of the way we can go about these two planned activities as part of the way forward for us as a research community.

The differences in perspectives that operate within our research community are only going to grow as our community grows. That should be welcomed as a positive element. Learning is about opening up to possibilities and the more minds that are devoted to it, and the wider the terrain that these minds cross, the more possibility that useful work will be done. I want to address here the dialogue that needs to go on within our community and the conditions that will enhance productive dialogue before I move on to the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous research practice.

I think that in the years since the Indigenous Researchers' Forum began in Newcastle, the dialogue and the relationships between us across the country have developed and improved, and I feel really positive about the direction we are going in. I can only speak for myself, but the very fact of getting together means that we get to know each other, that relationships form. Where relationships form, the possibility for understanding our differences, our individual strengths and weaknesses, and what we agree on and agree to disagree on, increases. I'm being honest when I say that these relationships between us are as fragile as any others. They need to be nurtured and worked on.



The importance of relationships and dialogue amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers

Research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts is already the most difficult of research, from a theoretical perspective, from a methodological perspective, from a practical perspective, from the perspective of the small numbers of people and skills we have, and from the perspective of the enormity of the task required. Academic research is also, by its nature, a fairly individualised intellectual activity. It would be helpful, I think, if as we move forward that we reflect on the ambiguities and contradictions for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research community as we operate in the tension between notions and constructs of the individual and collective.

As we struggle to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research more relevant, useful and accountable to communities, we must also keep in mind, and value as well, the individuals whose interests lie in the intellectual explorations at the intersections of theory and practice. We need to value and support practical work as well as value and support intellectual work that appears to have little practical application at this point in time. We should welcome all researchers and open ourselves to all topics of research. Scholarly activity is interwoven with individual intellectual development and growth. Intellectual movements most often have grown from individuals interrogating the contemporary wisdom of the time, and circulating their ideas for further scrutiny. If we want this to happen in our own research community we need to be open and tolerant and respectful to each other, no matter what our intellectual positions are, no matter what our politics are. We have to also accept scrutiny and interrogation of our work and of contemporary wisdom and commonsense if we want to be part of the research community. Research won't progress without building

this into our practice.

But scrutiny should be applied in a professional manner. So we should be thinking of codes of practice – not in the formal sense perhaps, but as a framework nevertheless for guiding our interactions with each other: to make sure we don't disintegrate as a community, that we don't self-destruct, so we don't factionalise on the basis of hurt feelings and disappointment and personal politics that inevitably come when people criticise each other's work. Scrutiny is about questioning positions, logic, facts, interpretation etc, not about "taking out" people or diminishing and ridiculing their efforts and second-guessing their motives or even their identity. It is a constructive process that works towards improving and developing people's work, not undoing it. The process should be about being supportive, about developing quality and excellence – not about forcing conformity on people by using destructive and manipulative mechanisms of power, which shut people down, diminish them and exclude them. In participating in this process, we need to understand the requirements of it and devote ourselves to working for constructive outcomes and not destructive ones. The greatest destruction that is going on in our communities is that wrought by us, on each other. We understand its origins but this research community that we are building must be aware of this tendency and steel against it. We need to be rigorous in our applications of standards upon each other but we should be supportive, encouraging and working for the long-term collective interest, not short-term selfish interests.

Working with non-Indigenous academics

Also in this process, we cannot cut ourselves off from the general academic community. Research is a public activity. It is competitive, open to scrutiny, relies on the public purse, and must be delivered and reported on. Academics who research, whether on the ground doing practical projects, or intellectually in the theoretical domain, are professionally required to disseminate their activity, through reporting, publication, conference and seminar presentation or all of the above. This holds true for us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. Yet we face enormous difficulties in research, from the beginning to the end of the process. We can develop our separate community, form our own association and we can produce our own journal. But all that we do still stands in the public domain for everybody's scrutiny. As well, much of the research we do, for practical and pragmatic reasons, has to be done in collaboration with non-Indigenous academics. When we are dealing with these relationships and dialogue at the level of scholarly knowledge production there are all the same interpersonal and historical factors at play that are present in broader social relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.

Education, even at the doctoral level, is no guaranteed eliminator of the racist, the missionary, the superior, the patroniser, or the down right arrogant. The person who praises and affirms you may be the same person who rejects your work for publication, who takes over your work and uses manipulative tactics to shape work the way they think it should be shaped, according to what fits with their understanding. The same person who wants to work with you will use other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to argue against your position, and will attempt to isolate you from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opinion, in order to hold sway in the process. I'm not going to dwell on this because it's not productive to do so. What I will say is that it means for us that we have to take care, and really attend to developing working relationships with non-Indigenous academics. We have to nurture these relationships constructively, however far from ideal they are. We have to extend ourselves into that community to find the people we can really work with well. And we have to educate them, persuade them, and shape them, much as we are tired of doing so. And in this process we must ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved, observing, learning the processes for ourselves. Our own skilling is paramount but it has to be accepted that with the numbers we have we can't be doing it all, all the time. And we must resist throwing in unskilled people and setting them up to fail. We need to build into our activity the training of our researchers and assistants and make sure they have the necessary skills and knowledge for dealing with the issues.

But perhaps the most powerful dialogue we can have with the non-Indigenous research community is not in our collaborations or interpersonal interactions, which are so fraught with the interpersonal. It is through the public circulation of our ideas, our thinking, our research, and our intellectualism, through publication. This is reaching into their domain, on their terms and engaging in research business in more strategic ways. It is, if you like, the inverse of having them engage in ours. It is risky, they can take us out. But in that process we can grow – with practice – through intersection, through borrowing and adding, by constructing new standpoints, by unsettling their positions, by having them contribute through criticism, by our rethinking and refining of our ideas in response. Non-Indigenous academics are open to it, as good researchers know the limits of their own positions. What we have to ensure is that we bring to this dialogue a sense of coherence as we marry academic convention to all our greatest strengths – our experience, our knowledge, our traditions. We have to make meaning for them of the things they have difficulty understanding or can no longer speak on, we have to address their logic, their assumptions and we have to write in our experience in a way that challenges academic knowledge and standards. That is the task.

Publishing research as Indigenous academics: Issues and problems

I want to turn now to discuss the journal and publication issues raised earlier. Concerns were raised in our first

Indigenous Researchers' Forum about the difficulty Indigenous researchers have in getting published and it was then that we entertained the idea of the *Kaurna Higher Education Journal* and how it could be resurrected for this purpose. A place and a space we could call our own. There have been many challenges putting this first issue together. A peer-reviewed journal is not straightforward for us – there are so few peers, fewer who do research and referee research papers. The people who do are already so overburdened that adding regular refereeing activities to their schedules is always a problem. This will mean bringing in non-Indigenous referees from time to time, which will strengthen our credibility but also introduce a different set of problems.

A lot of academic journals have trouble sustaining themselves, and it became apparent to those of us working on this journal that this was going to be a problem for us down the track. We are drawing from a very small community. And a real dilemma is if we set the standard too high then we are no different from any other journal that Indigenous people cannot get published in. If we lower the standard we make our position less credible. We can't argue that we are not concerned about academic convention and standards if we are going to put ourselves in that game. We don't want a substandard journal but we have to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship is at a particular historical point and very much in a period of transition – from fledgling to maturity – and that transition will take probably another decade, even a generation.

We therefore produced a journal to meet our needs at the current time. One that publishes refereed articles, one that publishes articles that might not strictly conform to academic convention and standards but which have interesting things to say or useful information to disseminate, and those that are of different genres entirely, creative and experimental pieces, etc. We have also included an international piece by an African scholar and I think that one international article per journal would be a good practice to adopt as it will keep us cognisant of the international Indigenous context. In these ways we begin the early process towards a scholarly journal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, academics and postgraduate students. We provide the means for our researchers to start as well as to move through to another level with regard to their publication work. We provide a space for serious scholars, for professionals outside the universities to contribute and for powerful and creative narratives of experience. We provide a venue for collective publication of our work. But the rigours of academic refereeing and scrutiny of work must be applied and we all have to expect that revising our work will be part of the process. We have to get used to it, expect disappointment, work to improve ourselves and be proud of the excellence that we will achieve. Remember, this is not just about us but also the broader development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarships in the disciplines.

At the Adelaide Forum, Professor Hughes also made reference to the coming together of representatives from fragmented and disparate communities into one united community that worked towards a national policy. We are in a similar position. We are few in number and we work across 40-odd universities as well as communities and other organisations. We also work across different fields and disciplines. And on top of that we have different politics and approaches and intellectual positions, different sets of loyalties, different histories.

We should not have any illusions about how scattered and localised we are in terms of geography and interests. As we go into this we want to organise both a mindset and an organisation that fosters cooperation and coordination of activity for the broader long-term common goals whilst allowing for inevitable differences. The worst thing would be to have competing factions or breakaway groups. It would be much better in my view to accept at the outset that there will be regionalisation of interests or alliances within fields or disciplines and to support these as legitimate and probably changing groupings under a united umbrella and a united cause. Then we have a mechanism for sharing and intersecting with each other, of coordinating meetings and workshops to encourage and support and benefit all rather than to compete and undermine each other.

We should also think about how to set up mechanisms for sharing information, for recording and collecting information, so that we make the most of what we produce as a community and maintain a historical record of our activity etc. Professional scholarship business isn't secret business, it's public business; it's about development, growth, monitoring and sharing. We can chip away in our separate intellectual endeavours but if we share information, strategies, ideas, if we share a common training regime, if all our separate cells of activity are prepared to coordinate then our impact can be substantial and have ripple effects proportionately well beyond our tiny domains. At about 2% of the population Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are never going to invert what we view as "dominant" practice. But we can rediscover that practice, unsettle its assumptions and practices and have an effect at its very foundations. That is how research works generally – bit by little bit – and we need to own and take responsibility for our little bits. I think that we together have really made progress over past years. I think we have the beginnings not just of a sense of research community but a sense of ownership and purpose about what we are doing. Our new researchers coming on will benefit from professional activity and positive support. I urge all of you to help build this spirit of community and assert yourselves professionally and respectfully to maintain good working relationships with each other, across the research community and into the general community, even as we differ, argue and contest the issues. We have a long road to travel; let's build it to last until we get there.

References

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About the author

Professor Martin Nakata (BEd, Hons, PhD) is the first Torres Strait Islander to receive a PhD from an Australian university and is currently Director of Indigenous Academic Programs at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney. His present work is in the Indigenous academic programs area and his research interests continue to be focused on the formal learning issues. In recent years, he has placed priority on online learning issues as well as on matters relating to the documentation and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems by Western institutions. He is widely published in several countries.