



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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Section A: Tertiary Education

Action Learning for Indigenous Education Students project

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Preamble

The Action Learning for Indigenous Education Students (ALIES) project was established at Central Queensland University (CQU) in 1998. Its original membership consisted of a group of eight first year Indigenous (Murri) students, who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education degree programme; an Indigenous, Sociology Honours student; the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts' Associate Dean Administration and sub-Dean of Students; and, a member of Nulloo Yumbah's support staff.

During their inaugural meeting the group, which was originally established to serve as a tutorial support group for Indigenous Education students, resolved to visit remote Luritja and Aranda schools in the Northern Territory as part of the school observation component of their course.

The student-teacher members of ALIES wanted to undertake this observation trip to further their explorations of their individual learning experiences or *journeys*. From this desire to research and understand *learning as journey* evolved the concept of developing their studies and experiences into an Action Research project: *ALIES*. Subsequent to their research the students and staff involved developed their awareness of learning and research as *personal experience* and the role of *relationships* in learning processes.

Focus

During their early meetings the ALIES group members focussed on three particular aspects of research in order to understand the implications of what they were proposing to undertake. These three aspects were: discovering what action research was; reflecting on their own learning histories and experiences; and, considering what their expectations and goals were for the journey they were planning to undertake.

Planning for Research

They dubbed those first four or five meetings *reconnaissance* as it was during this phase that the group discussed and began to investigate what *action research* was and how to write funding proposals for research. Members of ALIES also recognised that they would need to harness the expertise of CQU personnel who were familiar with students' needs and aspirations and the requirements of applying for Action Research grants while undertaking the *reconnaissance* phase. At this point they invited Pat Moran, sub-Dean of Students and Coordinator of Professional Practice to join the project. Pat's initial contribution was to present each student with a copy of the first chapter of 'The Action Research Planner' (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) for their information and discussion.

Similarly, it was during *reconnaissance* that the group began to appreciate the unifying effects of sharing prior learning experiences and the simultaneous effect of encouraging more reticent members of the group to actively participate. Common themes linking their shared learning histories included discovering that for them as Indigenous students:

- learning resulted from personal experience not learning from a distance (such as off the web or out of a text book);
- learning was informal and not linked to formal educational experiences;
- learning was often the unplanned consequence of an actual event;
- learning was significant upon reflection, that is, it was recognised to be of cognitive significance in hindsight.

The Three Learning Cycles

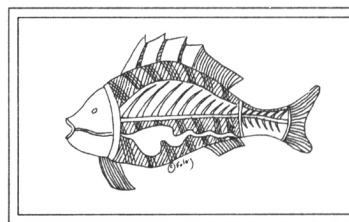
As a funding requirement for their action research proposal, ALIES members attended a planning workshop. In this workshop they identified three types of learning experiences which they as researchers/students would experience.

They ascribed the term cycles to these experiences and described them as: *me as a learner*; *me as a teacher*, and *me as an Indigenous teacher*. After the members of ALIES had identified those *learning cycles* relevant to them, they then posed *questions*, devised *data collection* strategies appropriate to each *learning cycle*, formulated *action* specific to that *cycle* and developed *reflection* models to evaluate the evidence gathered.

Cycle 1 - Me as Learner

Question: 'How is learning for us (individually and collectively) facilitated at CQU?'

Data Collection: This consisted of taping the conversations which ensued during the weekly discussion group of ALIES members - in this instance about the significant learning experience cycles described above. These tapes were then transcribed. Examination of the transcribed data revealed that there were commonalities and individual differences in the experiences related by the project members.



Commonalities included each member of the group noting that their relationships with their lecturers and tutors were of critical importance. Where individuals felt valued as students, were treated with dignity and respect, and where tutors gave willingly of their time to support students' academic endeavours, students enjoyment of and effort in those classes was viewed as being a critical factor in their achieving success:

this structure ... like all my life I've been given structured things and then all of a sudden he's (the lecturer) given me these things where I've got the right to think for myself, and you

*know no one's going to say to me
'that's not right'.*

Most difference was observed in individual ALIES members' reactions to the structure, content and modes of delivery of subject matter in different units. Whilst some students enjoyed classes where they were told '*there were no wrong answers*' others preferred a more structured approach or clear body of knowledge being presented to them.

Action: Having collected, recorded and discussed their data, ALIES then determined to present their findings to staff involved in working with Indigenous students at CQU through a workshop presentation. As individuals within ALIES became more confident in their interactions with lecturers they began initiating informal discussions with staff they found to be empathetic.

ALIES initiated a seminar presentation to student peers in their *Studies of Society and Environment Curriculum and Pedagogy* (SOSE) class. Consequent to the success of these activities, ALIES were then invited to make a presentation at a principals' and teachers' professional development day activity being organised by the State evaluators of the SOSE syllabus. ALIES held a seminar presentation for staff from the Faculty of Education & Creative Arts too. As a part of ALIES determination and commitment to dissemination of the evidence they were collecting they wrote a paper to summarise their research.

Reflection: ALIES members were pleasantly surprised at the positive responses they received to their various presentations. They noted that their presentations had fulfilled the premise of *Cycle 1 - Me as Learner* as they as presenters had facilitated other peoples' learning experiences in the way in which the ALIES members themselves most enjoyed learning: with the focus on the learner. This was clearly expressed to them by participants:

P1 *You didn't tell us what we should know.
You teased the learning out of us.*

P2 *You mean the knowledge was already
in there, in you?*

P3 *Yes and you (looking at the facilitators/
ALIES) teased it out of us ... very cool.*

ALIES observed that as they had successfully fulfilled their aim in Cycle 1, they could now carry into *Cycle 2 - Me as Teacher*, recognition of the importance of creating *learning-centred* environments where learners are encouraged to focus and draw upon their own experiences and their own knowledge.

Cycle 2 - Me as Teacher

Questions: 'What contributes to effective teaching practice for (Indigenous) students in schools?' and 'How can principles of effective teaching practice be put into action?'

Data Collection: As occurred in Cycle 1, data collection in Cycle 2 continued to be in the form of taping and transcribing conversations from the weekly round-table discussion held by ALIES. These discussions now focussed on ALIES members' reflections about their experiences the preceding Tuesday during their weekly observation day in primary schools, which they undertook as a component of the *Professional Practice 1 (PPI)* unit. That is, ALIES were investigating the degree to which they noted practicing teachers' efforts to implement *learner-centred activities* in their classrooms. They wanted to know the degree to which teachers were willing and able to cater for individual interests, learning needs and preferences.

Members noticed that while they did observe instances where children's feelings, experiences, knowledge and learning needs had been edified, there were many occasions when this was not the case. They established that while non-Indigenous children do experience this too, the degree of occurrence was greater for Indigenous students. ALIES identified the constant tension that exists for teachers between their desire to focus on the

individual learning styles, needs and preferences of each student within their class and their duty to fulfil 'system' level requirements and obligations including policy, procedures, class size, curriculum requirements, timetables, reporting etc. Members noted that teachers take on particular roles and decided that as action researchers they needed to examine, understand and question systems' level obligations compared to teachers' roles in determining how these obligations might impinge on the quality of students' learning experiences. ALIES wanted to know if these controls and obligations were necessary, what were the reasons for their existence and whose agenda they were fulfilling.

When discussing what constitutes a 'good teacher' they recognised that some characteristics are personal and cannot be learned through acquisition of a university degree: genuine care of and love for children, a deep understanding of oneself, a passion for learning and disseminating knowledge. ALIES identified that as teacher-students they needed to acquire, develop and critique certain skills through their practicums, study and research: lesson planning and preparation, practical teaching strategies, assessment and reporting methods.

Action: As the *action* component of Cycle 2, ALIES negotiated a review and redrafting of the unit requirements of the final two week practicum requirement for PP1 with their lecturers. They wanted this practicum to reflect their observation from Cycle 1 that there needed to be a greater emphasis placed on developing skills which encouraged student-teachers to question the whys and wherefores of how schools and classrooms function rather than perpetuating those models.

Reflection: Prior to embarking on their two week practicum, ALIES re-examined their PPI unit re-draft. They concluded that in addition to their observations of lesson planning and implementation, and evaluation of curriculum they, as individuals and collectively, would also need to reflect on the macro issues of education:

school policy and procedures, schools' relationships with their respective communities and the individual school's history.

Cycle 3 - Me as Indigenous Teacher

Question: As Indigenous student-teachers to what extent are we (or do we need to be) the same or different in these roles/as these people? How does our perception of the relationship between our views of ourselves as Indigenous people and teachers effect our work? The project team wanted to know how this relationship affected their work.

The questions which formed the focus for Cycle 3 were formulated as a consequence of ALIES members wishing to investigate how they saw themselves as a people: as Murris and as teachers who are products of their own unique learning experiences.

Data Collection: Recognising the validity and strength of what they had learnt from Cycles 1 and 2, ALIES students concluded that for Cycle 3 their decision to visit and work on a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory for their final two week practicum would provide them with extensive opportunities to discuss, question and reflect on both the issues and observations raised in those previous cycles and to extend their learning experiences in a unique and very different learning environment. In Cycle 1 they observed that an individual's past learning experiences impacted on their perceptions of themselves as learners. In Cycle 2 they noted that there are tensions between learner-centred teaching methodologies and systems requirements of teachers and learners. In Cycle 3 they would spend the entire two weeks' practicum working and living closely together which would provide them with the opportunity to constantly note, observe, record, discuss and critique their practical observations and experiences as student-teachers.

ALIES noted the following responses to their questions in *Cycle 3*:

- daily personal and group reflections regarding their efforts as teachers while on a practicum;
- viewing and discussing video recordings of teaching and other school and community activities;
- personal and group reflections on 'whole school' and relationships issues that emerged while they were away; and,
- thought and discussions about *insider* and *outsider* roles in the ALIES project.



Action: issues related to but not necessarily answered by the questions posed in *Cycle 3* include:

- *the question/impact of individual ALIES' project members' Aboriginality* varied between communities, schools, classes and students. ALIES members concluded that whilst some students in community schools queried their Aboriginality and/or ability to communicate in 'lingo' that it was their *relationships* as student-teachers with those students which was of primary importance and hence 'not being perceived as black became no major ideal ... in this context it was of little consequence'.
- *building positive relationships with students was the key to effective teaching and learning* - ALIES project members quickly established positive relationships with their students by actively participating in out-of-class activities like sport and listening to music. This resulted in a more tactile learning environment including holding hands, touching and hugging - behaviours which would not be condoned in conventional schools, a fact which the project members lamented noting that as a group they

had found that their students wanted to know them as individuals and that their lessons were more relevant, enjoyable and challenging as a consequence of this positive interaction with their students.

- *the successful application of different teaching and learning strategies, skills and ideas by ALIES team members whilst in their first year of study.* The project team recognised that whilst developing positive relationships with students was necessary, it alone was not sufficient to facilitate optimum learning experiences for their students. The project team acknowledged that they, as student teachers, must develop and hone the specific skills and knowledge acquired through study and practicums with relationship building to foster positive learning environments for students.

- *avenues for personal support outside project or work environments were identified as essential and should be explicitly considered and promoted.* All members of the project team noted that they had at some stage during the term of the project experienced sensations of feeling an *insider* or *outsider* that is, feeling excluded from the group. Each member noted that they had access to a network of support outside the group and that they discussed issues relating to the project with their respective networks. ALIES noted that they relied on these networks to affirm and clarify their thoughts and experiences.

Remaining ALIES members expressed concern that three original members of the group who had left may have experienced feelings of exclusion both from the group as a whole and to an outside support network (the Indigenous male student-teachers had left). Consequently, remaining members resolved that in future they will deal explicitly with issues relating to feelings of inclusion and exclusion to foster support and encouragement from within and outside of the project.

Finally, as an Action Research team from CQU, ALIES made a presentation at the *Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)* conference in Adelaide at the conclusion of their two-week practicum. At this conference they not only presented the results of their project but also discussed the notion of 'insider/outsider' roles in research issues associated with Indigenous people and communities.

Conclusion

Student-teacher members of the project team recognised that they will experience the issues discussed as a consequence of their research for Cycle 3 in their personal learning experiences for some time to come. They acknowledge that these experiences will contribute significantly to the shaping of their future learning and practice as teachers and that indeed no member of the ALIES project was left untouched by the experience.

In 1999 the Indigenous student-teacher members of ALIES will become tutors for first year Education students in two units: *Foundations for Indigenous Learning* and *Indigenous Ways of Learning*. Future plans for ALIES include aspirations to encourage all prospective Indigenous Education students to become involved in similar action research projects.

The ALIES Research Team:

- the Indigenous Student Team members
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- Lecturers:
 Pat Moran

David Spillman

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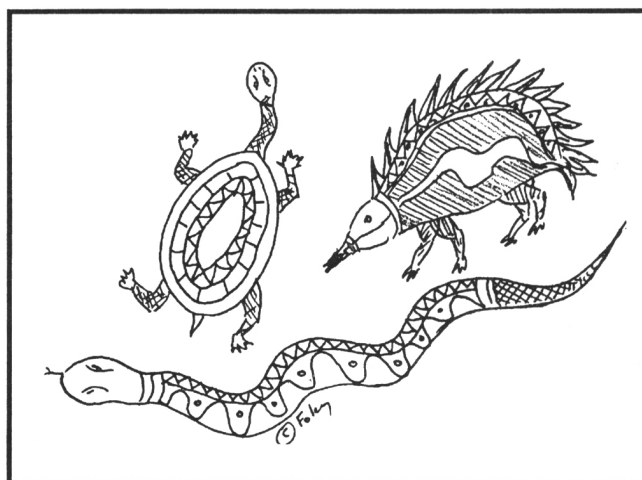
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References:

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R., *Introduction: the nature of action research* in The Action Research Planner, 3rd Edn., Deakin University, Victoria, 1988.



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