CHAPTER 5

YOUTH, LITERACY AND LEARNING SPACES

I n this final chapter we summarise the main findings of our research and suggest ways in which communities, practitioners and policy makers can support learning and literacy in remote Indigenous communities.

This book has reported on findings emerging from our efforts to answer three central research questions.

▶ How can early school leavers and disaffected young adults in remote communities be re-engaged with learning?

▶ How can literacy be acquired, maintained and transmitted outside school settings?

▶ How can learning and literacy be fostered across the lifespan?

Our search for answers to these questions involved a rich and productive collaboration with a range of Indigenous young people from remote communities, many of whom were themselves concerned with these questions. That collaboration resulted in an ethnographic study of learning, highlighting the many ways in which these and many other young people are developing the linguistic and conceptual skills and competencies (including language and literacy), technological know-how, and the work-oriented habits and attitudes required to move towards responsible adult roles and to function as competent members of their own and other communities. Importantly, this was all taking place outside of institutional education

settings. As highlighted in this book, this search also involved an exploration of an international theoretical literature that helped make sense of what we were observing and documenting and to draw on the insights that have emerged from research among other young people around the world.

Essentially, all three of our original questions are variations on the question: 'how can learning and literacy be supported in remote Indigenous communities?' We believe there is no more important question than this one. Our intention with this volume has not been to critique schooling and adult training, but rather to start a discussion that sheds light on the importance of 'non-formal' learning spaces. While we wish to emphasise again that our goal has not been to find a replicable or prescriptive model or method, we have in the chapters above identified what we believe are a starting set of principles for supporting productive learning activities. We hope these will be of value to individuals, communities and government when they are

investing ideas and resources in supporting young people. In the summary we provide below we argue that these investments should emphasise three areas:

1. Supporting learning spaces.

2. Sustaining the local and creating links to the global.

3. Valuing a wide range of outcomes.

SUPPORTING LEARNING SPACES

The outcomes of this research project have shed light on the generative capacity of new digital technologies and how they are enabling linguistic creativity and new multimodal forms among the youth generation in remote Indigenous communities. On another level the findings from this project have provided insights into what is happening in this relatively invisible domain and how new learning spaces have developed leading to creative cultural production and enterprise activities. The findings have also illuminated other more subtle aspects. In these new learning spaces young people are learning at their own pace and in the process acquiring the experiences, skills and capacities that underpin their development as future community leaders. Moreover what is evident is that the content of these new forms of cultural production pivot around young people's ongoing connection to kin and country.

Our research shows that it is critically important that young adults have access to learning spaces where they have control over the physical space, and the time and the resources to acquire and practice relevant, new skills essential for productive activity. As we have seen, this control is often a precursor to adopting or acquiring meaningful community roles and responsibilities which are essential for young people as they embark on a path towards employment and enterprise and ultimately community leadership (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2.
THE PROCESS OF PRODUCTIVE LEARNING
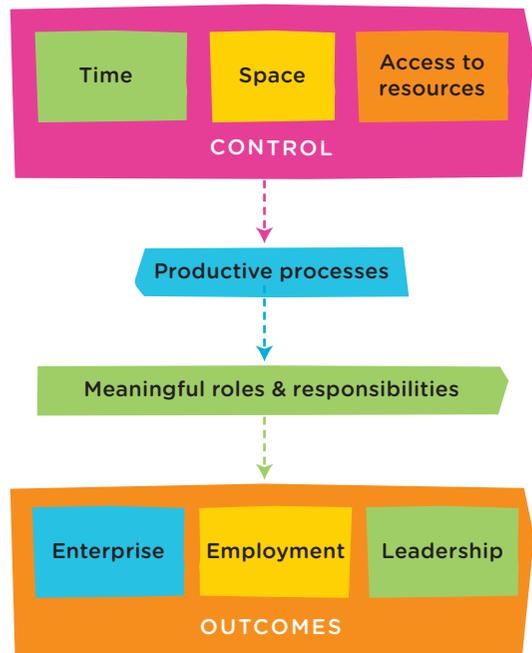
The productive learning facilitated by learning spaces involves a three-phase activity cycle:

1. Early phase trial and error experimentation and exploration.

2. Project-based learning often with mentor experts leading to intensive goal-oriented skills acquisition and interest-driven engagement.

3. Voluntary expertise development and independent creative cultural production leading to employment, enterprise and leadership.

We suggest that this activity cycle, and the embedded essential project-based learning approach, suits the remote youth learning context. The existence of a vibrant learning environment multiplies opportunities for engagement across and beyond the local community, and nurtures the development of enterprise, employment and leadership possibilities. While we acknowledge that mainstream education and accredited training works for some young people, there is clearly a significant number of adolescents and young adults who have enormous capacity and potential who are seeking other options for learning and meaningful activity. Many of the learning spaces we observed provide those options.

In summary, the processes of productive learning we observed in the learning spaces involved young people who are:

▶ experiencing meaningful participation in something that matters to them;

▶ thriving on trust and responsibility;

▶ learning individually or collaboratively as peers, yet able to call on mentors who offer advice or guide them toward the acquisition of new skills;

▶ increasing their skills and knowledge through practice, trial and error and learning from their mistakes;

▶ exerting a sense of control over what they are producing and how they are producing it;

▶ producing knowledge in the context of new and transformative processes;

▶ experimenting fearlessly; and

▶ visualising and achieving their desired goals.

Nevertheless, the achievement of productive learning is predicated on the alignment of a number of other elements. First, the community must value the program and have a sense of ownership; at the same time the non-Indigenous staff must be willing to share responsibility with the community, including handing over the keys (literally and metaphorically) to the learning space. Second, the community must participate in the development of clear guidelines around access to and the use of the technologies and facilities. Importantly, those guidelines must be supported and reinforced by the young people

similarly, the building of long-term productive relationships with the mentor experts who facilitate this growth requires flexibility and time. Recurrent funding models are the best means for supporting productive learning because they enable more flexible ongoing or customised sporadic training which takes into account locally-situated long-term needs and goals.

SUSTAINING THE LOCAL AND CREATING LINKS TO THE GLOBAL

Public discourse promotes the transition from school to training to employment in the 'real economy' (Pearson 2000) as the singular pathway to realising future opportunities for remote Indigenous youth. While mainstream employment is a pathway destination for some, for most it is not. Our research reveals weak linkages between schooling, training and employment in remote communities, and suggests that intergenerational models are not sufficiently robust for Indigenous youth to aspire to employment in the 'real economy'. Most importantly our findings indicate that many young people in remote communities do not imagine themselves leaving their community to seek employment. For them their responsibilities and their future lies at home, in 'belongingness' and in participation in meaningful, productive activities that will enhance the social and economic viability of their own communities.

An alternative vision in the Indigenous policy literature suggests another pathway for some Indigenous young people in remote areas through participation in the local 'cultural

(and their families) who use those facilities. Third, ongoing support for training, production and the maintenance of equipment is essential. Securing equipment and other large assets is sometimes relatively easy through one-off capital equipment funding programs, but without ongoing support those assets can become a liability. Specifically, in regard to training, a non-formal, project-based approach appears to be the most successful means for facilitating learning and skill acquisition. In particular, the approach allows for short, intense bursts of training by a visiting expert mentor. Such expert mentors play an essential supporting role in facilitating learning and keeping young people engaged and actively involved in ongoing projects. The best of these mentors actively pass on their skills to community members so that eventually their role is inhabited by a local expert. Obviously, while a traditional semester-based training delivery model suits annual bureaucratic funding rounds, it is too often inflexible and not conducive to maintaining participant engagement. It takes time for adolescents to pass through an initial 'entertainment and diversion' stage and to reach a point where they have acquired the skills and confidence for self-initiated productive activity;

economy' or 'hybrid economy' (Altman 2007). This pathway, which involves engagement with and maintenance of local culture, may have more relevance, and thus more traction, than a trajectory of credentialisation that promises yet often fails to deliver abstract future employment outcomes away from home. Such an approach may be more successful in building the local economy, affirming Indigenous identity and thus providing a template of meaningful adult engagement for the next generation to replicate.

While our research revealed that learning was virtually never regarded as a means to an employment end, we have seen evidence that engagement with out-of-school productive learning can result in enterprise generation and employment. In this sense, economic outcomes are being achieved in the various sites, although not in accordance with the school-training-work model that most policy makers imagine. Youth employment opportunities are opening up in arts and cultural centres, in media and music production, and in the application of digital media skills to archival databases and 'working on country' projects. These economic enterprises pivot around shared cultural belief systems and semiotic resources where both material *and* symbolic production is valued. In this way we are seeing remote Indigenous youth drawing from the traditional Aboriginal context to become knowledge producers, but in transformed processes, by making the connection between the local community context and a contemporary market economy. Furthermore, while we have seen that many young people have an enduring desire to fulfil their responsibilities to kin and

country, they are relishing the opportunity to take up new tools and technologies which can help them to both fulfil those obligations and to engage with the outside world. While most see their futures in local terms, they also revel in the opportunities they have to share their culture and stories with the outside world.

The projects outlined in the preceding chapters work because they draw on Aboriginal language and culture and link closely with local community interests and needs. We have shown the intergenerational links and how the cultural work of youth is supported by elders. We emphasise this aspect as a counterpoint to negative media commentary by indicating the importance of these sorts of programs and projects for strengthening the fabric of remote Indigenous communities.

The young people who appear in this book are deeply committed to the future. The path they have chosen involves sustaining the local and creating links with the global. Achieving this will entail paying attention to learning environments outside instructional settings and finding pathways to productive learning that encourage language and multimodal literacy development,

I don't like to go in other places because I love it here and it's the way we growed up.

AUGUSTINA KENNEDY
BESWICK COMMUNITY, 2008

One young man rarely attended school, on the occasion when he did go he was often told by teachers to go away because he was too disruptive. One year he had a really good teacher and attended a few times that year. One day he went and they had a maths competition and he won the maths prize! Now he is working as professional cinematographer…He had aimlessness, but not now, now he works for a pretty good hourly rate in a highly skilled profession, which if he did want to keep going and go and work in the film industry that's a possibility for him but that's not the sole purpose of the program. It's not about skilling people up to send them out of the community because that doesn't work for most of the kids that I've seen. It's about saying that with these skills you can find the ways that they will be useful in your own community, it's about community viability.

FLEUR PARRY
GENERAL MANAGER
DJILPIN ARTS, 2008

When I finished school … I was still doing like helping each other, helping families and friends, … I wasn't interested in AnTEP because for me it was like going back to school, … I wanted to do my way, … I was doing a little bit of teaching at the school, like reading books to little kids in English and Pitjantjatjara… People around me … wanted me to work or do some things that sound good to them, but I didn't listen to them 'cause I didn't want people to force me, … people forcing me it's like telling me to follow their footprints …people shouldn't force people, … because where I'll end up, I'll still end up a good life, …Well for me, for the future, I would like to stay in _Anangu_ community.

NATALIE O'TOOLE
PRESENTATION—
YOUTH LEARNING SYMPOSIUM
DARWIN, 2009

First learning is for yourself to be strong, before you can help others… All I can tell the government is strengthen the people first, let them choose whether they want to become a plumber or a lawyer or become a pilot, let them choose. All they got to take is right way teaching, really teaching for something, not just to look good…So I'm thinking, go back to the drawing board, go and make yourself strong first. That'll teach you everything about being a good parents too. That's what my culture taught me.

STEVE JAMPIJINPA PATRICK
WARLPIRI EDUCATOR AND LEADER
LAJAMANU, 2008

VALUING A WIDE RANGE OF OUTCOMES

A key feature of literacy and learning among Indigenous youth in remote Australia today is their adoption of, and intense engagement with, digital media. This new reality has given our project—and this book—its particular focus. Though our project set out to explore literacy, the young people we worked with quickly taught us that *learning* is the more significant and relevant aspect of their lives. For them, learning was variously self-directed, peer-based, observational, experimental and often playful. They learned by observing, sometimes by trial and error and other times from mentors and experts. Most importantly they learned by doing. Literacy, in its many forms, grew out of these processes. But we want to emphasise that our findings should not be seen to suggest a devaluing of more traditional course-based approaches to media training or literacy learning, especially practice-based approaches. We have seen that these approaches can be enormously valuable if the emphasis is on learning.

While our work came to emphasise the need to better understand and support those who do not or who may not be willing or able to participate in courses, we believe our findings are relevant for pedagogical design and delivery. Indeed, there is ample evidence that adult literacy courses, like the learning spaces we described, are most effective when learning is underpinned by recognition of personal histories and the social and cultural environments in which people

positive identity formation and some form of economic enterprise. For many young people who have dropped out of formal education in their early teens, participating in this kind of alternative learning pathway can be a stepping stone to re-entering the formal education and training system. It is clear that through engaging in the youth-oriented programs and projects outlined here many young people have acquired confidence, initiative, aspirations, intellectual and creative energy and skills. Further, they have demonstrated the capacity for reflection and perfection that can be taken into further training, employment and enterprise generation, as well as future leadership roles.

ICTs are clearly generating unique opportunities for Indigenous youth and creating a new generation skilled in digital technologies.[1] While only a small number of young people may be employed in the ICT industry, developing competence in this domain will have a ripple effect in the employment domains of arts centres, land management, ranger programs, health, environmental health, community history research and archiving, radio and TV broadcasting, and the Australian film industry, as well as academic research.

live. Those personal and local contexts are vitally important in the ways they shape options and capacities for learning (Chodkiewicz, et al. 2010). Paradoxically, it has been shown that literacy is more likely to grow if literacy itself is not over emphasised and people's life projects are the focus of activity (Barton 2009:57). This is confirmed in our observation of the many meaningful and productive learning activities carried out in the communities and among the young people we worked with.

We recognise that our call to emphasise learning over formal teaching and training raises some serious problems for policy makers. In contravention to the growing demands for 'skills' and 'evidence-based' policy, the successful learning we observed was often inconspicuous or invisible, and the outcomes typically could not be 'captured in terms of short-term quantifiable gains' (Cuban 2009: 13). This suggests to us the need to acknowledge 'soft outcomes' such as gains in self-esteem, personal development, confidence, motivation, collaboration and problem-solving (Barton 2009: 56). It also highlights the need to incorporate locally-specific indicators of program or project success

As has been observed elsewhere, policies and public investments in literacy curriculum and pedagogy are almost always rationalised in terms of measurable impact on literacy proficiency. If literacy proficiency does not immediately increase, programs are often judged a failure. Yet research shows that gains in literacy proficiency seldom appear overnight. Rather, programs that support high levels of engagement

leading to increased literacy practice result in the long term in higher levels of proficiency (Reder 2009:47). Though our research did not address formal adult literacy instruction, those findings have a deep resonance with our observations that meaningful engagement with practice—with productive learning—and the 'soft outcomes' it yields, may lead to greater proficiency in a number of domains in adult life.

In addition, our research shows that the pathway to meaningful outcomes sometimes may be slow, but that each learning experience incrementally builds up the skill-base of the individual and contributes to the development of collective expertise over the long-term. This collective expertise is also very difficult to quantify and measure, yet it is clear that it is a crucial element for catalysing young people in productive learning and for the development of community engagement, enterprise (including employment) and ultimately community leadership. Significant too is the way in which all these successful young people become role models and provide a new sense of possibility for successive generations to aspire to.

In conclusion, if Indigenous young people are to become competent, mature adults able to shape their own futures and the economic and social viability of their communities, then attention will need to be paid not only to institutional education and training pathways, but also to other approaches to productive learning that will contribute to the formation of a positive sense of self, strong cultural identities and the learning and literacy skills needed to shape Indigenous futures. The challenge for all of us is to find ways to design and support these various and exciting forms of productive learning. We hope this book will be a contribution toward meeting that challenge.

Chapter 5 endnotes

1. Statement on Key Issues, ITIC Symposium, 13–15 July, Canberra. Available at: **http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/ symposia/Digi10.html**