Self in Practice and Research: Encouraging Lifelong Learning on an Australian Aboriginal Program.

Leanne King, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

‘In problem posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves: they come to see the world as not static reality, but as a reality in progress, in transformation.’
- Paulo Freire, Brazilian Educator

Introduction
This paper offers a preliminary exploration of my early doctoral research project. As such, it is to be understood as a work in progress. With that said, the paper explores a contemporary university program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) people offered at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). As an Indigenous woman I begin by briefly exploring the appropriateness of taking an auto-ethnographic approach in my proposed research. Having argued for an auto-ethnographic approach that acknowledges Self as the researcher and Self as part of the research, I then move to analyse Self and representation of Self. This introduction includes histories shared by Australian Indigenous people. It also includes the Individual negotiation of these histories by my Self. Hence in this paper, I offer an account of both the shared and unique histories and my perspective on lifelong learning of the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

Jones, (in Walter, 2006 p 321) states that ‘an ethnographic approach is based on a desire to explore a particular social or cultural setting to gain an understanding of the phenomenon from an insiders point of view and draws on the first-hand experience of the research’. As an Indigenous woman, I am such an ‘insider’. In this paper I use my experience as both a lecturer and also as a past student to present an insider view of the program.

Specifically, this paper highlights my awareness of self within the culture of a mainstream institution, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), which delivers a unique program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. An auto-ethnographic approach acknowledges my understandings of the program and how it is delivered, in accord with my cultural identity, values, beliefs and ethics.
Approach
Being an Aboriginal woman means that through default I am among Australia’s most researched peoples. Ethnographers have traditionally focused on ‘the other’. For Aboriginal people this has meant being rendered passive objects of study. Auto-ethnography, and specifically for Indigenous researchers, offers a more active position toward knowledge production. An auto-ethnographic approach enables active participation in the production of knowledge about Aboriginal people and issues they face.

Auto-ethnography refers to the researcher’s use of portions of her [sic] own life story in an ethnographic project. It allows the researcher to interrogate her reasons for engaging in a specific field (Baker, in Austin, 2005, p19). As an approach to research it provides a way to be attentive to self within a culture, as an Aboriginal practitioner/researcher/ auto-ethnographer.

According to Austin (2005 page 21) ‘it is useful to look at auto-ethnography as consisting of three major components: description of the self, analysis of the Self and the (re)presentation of the Self’. In this paper I will describe my Self (or Selves more correctly), analyse my self, and then consider the (re)presentation of self within a unique Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander program.

Using this framework, the paper that follows introduces (my) self, analysis of self and the re presentation of self. Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research method which includes within its scope both personal narrative as well as reflective. This method of investigation allows the researcher to write from their own experience. (Ellis, 2000, p741)

Self: [Author’s name] – Dharug woman
Allow me to introduce myself - I am a Dharug woman: an Aboriginal woman. My cultural connection is through the land of the Dharug people and connection to family. Dharug is only one of approximately six hundred Aboriginal nations of Australia. Being a Dharug woman, teaching people from other nations, presents its own sets of problems (but that’s another paper). Even while identifying as a Dharug woman, I add that I have had, and continue to have, a relatively westernised lifestyle. I am an ‘urban’ woman: I lived in Sydney’s western suburbs and attended mainstream educational institutions throughout my schooling years. By mainstream I mean I attended a public primary and high school.

My current position as lecturer, again, locates me within a mainstream institution (i.e. University of Technology, Sydney). However, this position involves working with (and alongside) other Indigenous people on a non-mainstream program, i.e. an A&TSI Residential Block Program otherwise known as an Away-From-Base (AFB) program. I am a graduate of the UTS
program having completed a Bachelor of Education in Adult Education and a Master of Arts in Indigenous Social Policy. Both of these involved participating in a ‘residential’ as a mature aged student. Now, several years on, I am a lecturer at UTS. UTS has been instrumental in my life-long journey of learning.

My proposed doctoral study will be exploring “what are the ways of knowing, being and doing in Tertiary Education on Indigenous Away-from-base programs?” In other words, in my forthcoming doctoral program, and also in the paper you are reading now, I speak as a Dharug woman who has a range of experience with the unique program offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at UTS.

“The protocol for introducing one’s self to other indigenous people is to provide information about one’s cultural location, so that connections can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established” (Moreton Robinson, in Martin 2008, p 19)

It is with these words in mind that I greet my students. These words also resonate as I begin doctoral studies, of which this paper is a part.

Self as practitioner/ researcher
It is from an Indigenous standpoint that I approach my research that will be read by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and this presents issues of its own. Nakata (1998) is helpful in this regard because he developed an intellectual standpoint from which Indigenous scholars can read and understand the Western systems of knowledge. Of particular interest are those knowledge’s that have shaped how the position of Indigenous people is understood both by others and by themselves as they view their position through the knowledge of others. Porsanger J (2004) states that the Indigenous approaches to research in Indigenous issues are not meant to compete with, or replace, the western research paradigm; rather to challenge it and contribute to the body of knowledge of Indigenous people about themselves and for themselves and for their own needs as peoples, rather than as objects of investigation.

This paper will therefore be written from an Indigenous standpoint that will discuss a specific body of knowledge within the higher education sector in an Indigenous program delivered via a mode of delivery quite different to many mainstream programs. I take Martin’s (2008) explanation of epistemological, ontological and axiological approaches and relate my story through her theory of relatedness, giving a holistic picture of the way Tertiary education impacts on Indigenous students and lifelong learning on Away-from-base programs which has been a government initiative relating to policy.

The Historical, Political and Social Self
A major shaping influence of my Self is a shared Aboriginal history. Although, in saying that I add that Aboriginal Australia is as diverse as Australia is in general. We are the original peoples of this land that had been classified as *terra nullius*, which is understood as ‘land over which no previous sovereignty has been exercised’. It was not until 1992, in the case of Mabo vs the State of Queensland, that this terminology was overruled. We were colonised by the English in 1770 and as a race of peoples we have been governed by many racist and disempowering policies. These legislations and policies have all manner of effects for Aboriginal peoples: including, dispossession, segregation, protection, assimilation, and integration. On a more positive note, the ‘reconciliation movement’ is again gaining momentum between both Indigenous and the *non*-Indigenous people: the Rudd government’s ‘Sorry Speech’ has injected a new urgency. Among indigenous people (and others who work alongside them) are calls for self-determination. For many, it is the self-determination of our people that will enable us as a nation of Aboriginal Australia to move forward.

While contemporary Australia is commonly understood as comprising a total of seven state and two territories, the original inhabitants of this land understood things differently. There exists a map representing quite different tribal or nation groups of the Indigenous people of Australia - each with its own dialect. According to this mapping, there are over 650 dialects spoken in Australia. This, in turn, means a great diversity of cultures within the Aboriginal culture. There are still many of the 650 dialects spoken today thanks to a range of ‘revitalising language’ programs. These sorts of programs play an important role in the process of education, lifelong learning and self-determination in relationship to our identity and culture.

In all, Australian Aboriginal population is not, nor ever was, a homogenous mob. Today’s Aboriginal society is as diverse as its peoples, its languages, its cultures, its lores and its kinship. With that said, there are relatively few people living a traditional lifestyle practiced for thousands of years prior to colonisation. All cultures evolve, and the Aboriginal culture is one of change and evolution.

Our people are often described today as being ‘remote’ or ‘urban’. Basically those living in the city are ‘urban’, and those living outside the big cities are ‘remote’. This has the potential to create (and has created) division between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in regard to such basic human rights as proper access to health, employment education and in some instances access to infrastructures for growth as a community. Moreover, another interesting and related (and perhaps little known) fact is that Aboriginal people must demonstrate their Aboriginality to be recognised by the Australian government. This requires us to meet three specific criteria. We must first ‘identify’ as Aboriginal. Next, we must be recognised by our community as Aboriginal. And finally we must be able to ‘prove descendency’. This
legislative requirement has far reaching implications for education, employment, health and social assistance.

It was not until the 1970’s that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people began to exercise control over policy development in relationship to self-determination – this means, the right to take responsibility for decisions which may affect our own lives and that of the life’s of future Aboriginal people. As a people, we have faced many issues and it is time to move forward and the way forward - Education plays a pivotal role here.

An important contribution to the goal of self-determination occurs through a unique University of technology, Sydney (UTS) program where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students have the opportunity to attend university and gain an undergraduate degree. For many of our people, it provides a chance to attend university, and in doing so take steps toward even greater change, self-determination and the growth of a nation and its people.

The preamble of Coolangatta Statement (1999) iterates what UTS is accomplishing. The Coolangatta Statement represents a collective voice of Indigenous peoples from around the world who support fundamental principles considered vital to achieving reform and transformation of education for Indigenous peoples. It states:

Over the last 30 years, Indigenous peoples throughout the world have argued that they have been denied equity in non-Indigenous education systems which has failed to provide educational services that nurture the whole Indigenous person inclusive of scholarship, culture and spirituality….Most all Indigenous peoples, and in particular, those who have suffered the impact and effects of colonization, have struggled to access education that acknowledges, respects and promotes the right of Indigenous peoples to be indigenous--a right that embraces Indigenous peoples' language, culture, traditions, and spirituality. This includes the right to self-determination (1999:1).

Self in the Research
The A&TSI block program is an affirmative action initiative of the University of Technology, Sydney. Prior to 2007 the degree offered in this mode was the Bachelor of Education in Adult Education, and a double degree Aboriginal Studies and Adult Community Education. It is now the Bachelor of Education in Adult Education with a major in Language Numeracy and Literacy. The degree is three years full-time study and aims to develop practitioners who have a deep understanding of learning and a commitment to learning of others, and who are responsive to the human needs of the people with whom they work.

The A&TSI block program began in 1983 with the development of a professional course for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from
across all Australia’s states and territories. These students were (or aspired to be) community educators in their local communities. The program took its first intake of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in 1984. The program also appointed the first Aboriginal person to a tenured position in a NSW University in 1986. In 2008 the program enrolled approximately 100 students in its various undergraduate and postgraduate courses in education. I enrolled in the under-graduate program in 1998, graduated from the Masters of Arts Indigenous Social Policy in 2002 currently undertaking a doctoral program – a profound lifelong learning experience, if anyone had suggested to me 10 years ago I would be a lecturer on the undergraduate degree I would have laughed at them.

As earlier stated, locally the program is known as an Away-From-Base (AFB) program. This is because the program attracts both urban and remote students. We have students from up to about 5000 kilometres away from Sydney. For example our students travel from as far as the Torres Strait Islands, Western Australia and Tasmania to participate in the program - although we also have students who live in Sydney, as I did, studying on the degree. To achieve this, the Program is delivered in residential block mode enabling students to combine full-time study, while employed or seeking employment.

The final outcome of the three years of study for most students is the Bachelor of Education in Adult Education. This degree allows the graduand to teach Aboriginal studies, community development and educator, teaching in our technical and further Education sector known as TAFE and workplace staff development and has been a stepping stone to lifelong learning.

There are currently around 80 students studying in the Unit at various stages of their degrees. As previously stated the diversity in our culture is reflected in our students. The demographics of the program change from year to year, but generally speaking our students are Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islanders, between the ages of 22-65+ with the average age being 35-38. (I was 38 when I applied to enrol)This represents a drop in average age from previous years – a drop that appears to be a reflection of the changes to the program and previous government initiatives. Most of our students are female. This is probably because the study demand on male students impinges on their capacity to adequately provide for themselves and their families.

Overall, the UTS program is a much-needed one: as advocated the Australian Human Rights Commissions Social Justice Report 2005: In 2002, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were less than half as likely as a non-Indigenous people to have completed a post-secondary qualification of certificate level 3 or above (that is post-graduate degree, graduate diploma or certificate, bachelor degree, advanced diploma, diploma and certificate levels 3 and 4).[1] Nationally in 2004, Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander students were half as likely to continue to year 12 as non-Indigenous students.

These statistics are reflected in our students in the program many have not completed high school let alone received any tertiary education as was with my Self, I did not complete high school, I worked to survive doing factory work, office work retail and I worked for community organisations. Currently many of our students work in their communities in Aboriginal Land’s councils, Aboriginal legal services, or as Aboriginal school liaison officers. We also have students who are working in other universities who are completing the program to obtain the qualification.

**Analysis of Self**

Russel (in Austin, 2005 page 24) states: ‘The ethnographer understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical process. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a staging of subjectivity – a representation of the self as a performance. In the politicization of the personal, identities are frequently played out among several cultural discourses, be they ethnic, national, sexual, radical and/or class based. The subject ’in history’ is rendered destabilized and incoherent.’

Both my shared history and individual history combine. Moreover, the program itself (along with its history) culminates. Here then, I turn to share with you UTS’s unique program. I say ‘unique’ because UTS boasts a higher than average percentage of Aboriginal people among its staff. Aboriginal people make up 2% of the UTS workforce, which is almost commensurate with the 3% of Australia’s population. This is significant given the under-representation of participation by Aboriginal people in all forms of education institutions (let alone their role as teachers in these institutions).

The Faculty of Arts and Social Science at UTS, in which I work, currently employs three Aboriginal lecturing staff on the Bachelor program.. For more information I invite you to explore our website: [www.education.uts.edu.au/atsi](http://www.education.uts.edu.au/atsi). Although not entirely accurate, the area of UTS in which I work is locally known as the ‘Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Unit’. This naming is the legacy of one of many restructures. Like many other institutions, the university, the faculty, the unit, and the programs it offers have been through many changes. We have faced faculty restructures, course restructures and staffing restructures all of which impact in one way or another on the students and their learning (again fodder for another paper). With that said, I am happy to add that the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Residential Block Program has weathered more than its share of restructures, and remains a unique opportunity for A&TSI students.
Representation of Self (Representation in the program and the research)

Being an Aboriginal woman, my interest in this field of study arises in part from my own experiences of away-from-base study mode learning as a student, lecturer, co-ordinator and advisor. Over the past 10 years I have developed a passion and curiosity about improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies and frameworks in the belief of the continuation of these programs and life-long learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. As an Aboriginal student studying in this particular mode I experienced issues such as isolation, lack of confidence in my capacity to complete a university degree and self-worth. I see these issues mirrored in the faces of my students, and so my own experiences enable empathy. It was very difficult for me to study fulltime, raise a family, work and fulfil my community roles and obligations whilst maintaining my sanity. I saw many of my fellow students in much the same situation. Nowadays I see many of my own students facing similar situations, and this mediates my experience as a lecturer on the program.

Providing ‘pastoral care’ forms a large part of my role as a lecturer at UTS. This involves supporting students with issues concerning families, employment and health. McCubbin and Laurie (2006) discuss the importance of family in Indigenous cultures and its impact on psychological and physical health. There is a paucity of research and a lack of measurement on Indigenous families’ worldviews and their respective impact on well-being. It is not uncommon for students to pop into my office just to talk through family issues that are impacting on their study.

Conclusion
To conclude this paper I acknowledge the concerns of many researchers such as Armstrong, Sparks, Reed-Danahay, Walters and others in the authority of auto-ethnographic approach, but for the purpose of this work in progress it allows me to explore the connections of Self, analysis of Self and the Representation of Self, the UTS program and the shared life long journey of teaching and learning of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders students. It is an opportunity to share historical, political and social uniqueness of Australian Indigenous peoples in toady’s society.

References
Armstrong P 2008 Toward an autenthnographic pedagogy, University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults. University of Edinburgh, Moray House of Education
Austin J (2005) Culture and Identity, Pearson-SprintPrint, Sydney Australia


University of Technology, Sydney (ny) www.education.uts.edu.au/atsi
Accessed 15th Jan 2009


This document was added to the Education-Line database on 25 June 2009