Batchelor Institute

FINDING COMMON GROUND:

NARRATIVES, PROVOCATIONS AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE 40 YEAR CELEBRATION OF BATCHELOR INSTITUTE

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This book is a series of chapters responding to the Batchelor Institute 40 Years Conference: Finding Common Ground with Indigenous and Western Knowledge Systems (7-8 August 2014) held at Batchelor Campus, Batchelor Institute, Northern Territory, Australia.

All chapters submitted to the editors of this book meet the Australian Government Research Council's definition of research. Papers identified by * on the contents page indicate chapters refereed by two independent peers. Papers without an * identifier indicate non-refereed papers.

HOW TO REFERENCE THIS BOOK

Huijser, H., Ober, R., O'Sullivan, S. McRae-Williams, E & Elvin, R. (Ed.) 2015. *Finding the Common Ground: Narratives, Provocations and Reflections from the 40 Year Celebration of Batchelor Institute*. Batchelor NT: Batchelor Press.

eBook ISBN: 978-1-74131-310-9
Paperback book ISBN: 978-1-74131-309-3

Paperback printed in Batchelor, Northern Territory, Australia
Published by Batchelor Press
www.batchelorpress.com
+61 8 8939 7352
c/o Post Office, Batchelor NT 0845

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Finding common ground in a digital archive of Aboriginal languages

Michael Christie, Brian Devlin, & Catherine Bow

Introduction: 40 Years On

As we paused to celebrate 40 years since the establishment of Batchelor Institute[1] we reflect on the conference theme for the 40 year celebrations: 'Finding the Common Ground with Indigenous and Western Knowledge Systems'. The Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages[2] is a growing archive of texts and related resources produced over the same 40 years in more than 25 Aboriginal languages. The archive is built on thousands of books which have been produced in Literature Production Centres in bilingual schools of the Northern Territory since 1973, and it continues to grow. Much of the literature was produced by Aboriginal language workers, who were trained to record, transcribe, edit and translate their own languages over many years at Batchelor. Now in 2014, in the second stage of its development, more resources, often previously unpublished and in rare languages, are being added. This is being achieved with the help and resources of Batchelor's Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics (CALL), and will include materials currently in the CALL archive, produced in the centre (and its predecessors) and in remote communities by its students.

As a digital archive, the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages exists in many different locations, not only on the large servers of digital content in Charles Darwin University's eSpace, but also in the offices and workspaces where people are developing its computer code, or collecting and digitising and uploading books and texts, and in remote communities where language owners are reviewing and giving permission for their stories to be included. But principally, it comes alive on computer screens around the NT and further afield, where interested people are searching through the texts for study or for sheer delight in the stories and their illustrations.

Our theme of 'Finding Common Ground' encourages us to think carefully about how these texts originated and what will happen to them as they move from the processes and places of their original production to their multiple manifestations as they come to life wherever the archive is used. What does 'common ground' mean in this context?

Both-ways philosophy and common ground

Batchelor has a long tradition of what has come to be known as 'both-ways' education (Ober & Bat, 2007). The term is often misinterpreted or taken to refer to conventional formal education practice in its attempts to foreground Aboriginal knowledge. When 'both-ways' is taken seriously it often finds significant opposition from people stuck in their commitment to the knowledge practices of the enlightenment tradition. So it is always worth returning to the question of 'both-ways' in order to keep the uniqueness of Batchelor's mission at the forefront of our practice. Aboriginal knowledge, we are often reminded, is celebrated as belonging to particular people in particular places (how different from the universalised knowledge claims of rationalism and positivism in the enlightenment tradition!). What happens to the located nature of Aboriginal knowledge when (in the official words of the Batchelor website) our practice

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1 We refer to the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and its predecessor Batchelor College both as 'Batchelor'.

2 The Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages is an ARC funded collaboration between Charles Darwin University, NT Department of Education, Batchelor Institute, NT Library, Australian National University and NT Catholic Education Office, available at www.cdu.edu.au/laal/

"brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge, and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts"[3] in both-ways education? Do we abandon Aboriginal claims of ownership and locatedness, or does a both-ways epistemology demand that we continue to search to create some common ground and collective ownership in the different particular contexts of our knowledge work?

Both-ways knowledge work demands that different knowledge traditions work together seriously and in good faith on common ground. It understands knowledge as *performative* (something you *do* rather that something you *have*), and *constructed* (rather than *discovered*) (Christie, 2005). It takes seriously the role of place (and of common ground) in producing knowledge, and thus it opens tricky questions for people theorising digital technologies. It forces a radical re-think of some of our most taken-for-granted theories. We realise, for example, that it is misconceived to think of a text or an archive as *containing* knowledge. The text is better conceived of as an artefact of some previous knowledge production episode (Christie, 2004). It contains traces of previous work which must be reconstituted, revitalised, reconfigured, renegotiated, and represented in each new context of knowledge work. We must preserve these traces if they are to take their part in new both-ways knowledge work. How do we do the work of ensuring that, as the texts become freely accessible everywhere in the world, they maintain their links to their origins and owners and do not escape into an alien knowledge economy? Or, put another way, how do we ensure that the archive is developed and activated on 'common ground' and to *produce* common ground? How is common ground theorised in digital environments?

3 http://www.batchelor.edu.au/

A gathering of linguists, language workers and librarians: back on common ground

Batchelor is a partner in the second stage of the development of the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages, and in a recent two-day workshop (July 2014) we took the opportunity to look carefully at the contents of the CALL archive and to make decisions over hundreds of texts as to whether they might be suitable for inclusion into the Living Archive, and if so, who might be contacted to give permission and assistance for them to be evaluated and uploaded for public access. It was a great opportunity for linguists and language workers to sit down together and look over the work of the past 40 years. Someone tallied up all the time which people in the room had collectively spent working on NT languages and it came to a total of almost 800 years! We worked in groups at tables of languages and/or places — Wadeye languages, Tiwi, Maningrida languages, Yolŋu languages, Ngukurr, Numbulwar, Borroloola, Gurindji, Warlpiri, Pintupi-Luritja, Warumungu, Arrernte and more beside.

Of particular interest and significance was the work which had been produced during Aboriginal Languages Fortnight (ALF), an annual event in many remote communities where Batchelor students would work for two weeks with their own cultural authorities (usually elders from their own or related clan groups) documenting a particular aspect of their own history and culture, in their own languages, on their own land. It was up to each student to negotiate their own project – finding some elder in the community to work with, agreeing upon a topic they had a right and a reason to explore, listening and sharing and learning how to document what they were learning, and the basis upon which they might be able to share it with others.

At the workshop (one of the biggest reunions of linguists and language workers ever on common ground in the NT), one group worked with a linguist and two language workers on texts in Yolŋu languages. Librarians and CALL

staff had opened the archive collection and sorted the many hundreds of manuscripts into boxes of languages or places of origin, and we went through the Yolŋu boxes one by one. In the bilingual programs, most of the Yolŋu books were in the official languages of Gupapuyŋu, Djambarrpuyŋu and Gumatj. But the texts from CALL and ALF showed a much greater range of Yolŋu languages. Going over the dozens of small documents was an emotional experience, often funny, often nostalgic. Most of the elders who supervised the students have long since passed away, and so in fact have many of the students. But each story we came across reminded us of people, of connections and of places where the collaborations over language and history had taken place. Only a few would require further work to identify the authors or owners. Various coloured stickers were used to show what was decided about each one. A red sticker meant that the story is very likely not one which should be made public. A green sticker meant that it is an interesting or important story which anyone should be able to access if we undertake the right negotiations.

Yirritja floodwater: coming together in good order

If we trace one of these Yolŋu texts, we might be able to use its story to think about its challenge to find common ground in a digital environment. For his ALF project, one year in the late 1970s, a young Yolŋu man was interested to investigate and to document how floodwater rushing down from the hills connected up many different clan groups which belong to the Yirritja moiety. His was quite a simple text, but it would have been carefully negotiated with the owners of about a dozen different ancestral lines. Linguists from Batchelor and the Department of Education were on hand to help with the linguistic work, as he and the other students went off each day to do further research and return for help writing it up.

When the heavy rains come, the waters start coming down from the Mitchell Ranges, and as they approach the sea through their many branches, they carry with them the flotsam and jetsam accumulated during the long dry season. It is an important story told and sung in many languages and many places, which teaches us about how people are connected and the right approaches to problem solving and conflict resolution. This story didn't go into those philosophical details; it was a simple story of Yirritja water, places and peoples following the song lines. This song, his text concluded, reveals to us why, in the final stages of a big Yirritja ceremony, the different clan groups must each wait until the floodwaters reaches their own ancestral land, before they can walk down from the beach and into the sea, clan by clan, for the cleansing ritual. It is a short but beautiful story of connectedness to place and to other people, of important fundamental differences and of sameness, of the primacy of place in identity and celebration, of joyful dancing and music making, of environmental cycles, and of ancestral stories and ceremonies helping us to do things in an orderly, responsible collaborative way.

So there, at Batchelor, a couple of months ago, this story resurfaced with a flood of memories in a box of papers which had been stored in the CALL archive for over thirty years. What to do with it? We need to bear in mind that the original research project, when the young student would have walked around from camp to camp checking his facts with the right authorities and reading out and amending his drafts, became a story which was given particularly to him, tailored by his elders for his own study purposes. We could not assume that the story should be open to the public or that it is universally true in any sense. It still belongs to him, long after his untimely death, and bears the signs of its own production.

The Yolŋu language workers at the workshop studied the story carefully. It was given a green priority sticker as a significant story, important for all Yolŋu children to know, and containing no secret or potentially controversial material. We actually remembered how this version of the story had come into being, with whose help, and we decided upon which people we would need to consult to see if they were happy for this version of the story

to be made public, under the author's name. Once the appropriate permissions are obtained, the metadata for this item can be configured to include some of the additional information not included in the item itself, but remembered at the workshop or gathered through the seeking of permission. Various notes fields can include such information, and the item can be linked to other items in the collection. Such enrichment of metadata is a key component in ensuring that this is a Living Archive, encouraging users to enhance and customise information about each item. It is not clear yet whether that particular story will make it into the archive, as there is still a lot of negotiation to be done with people in remote places. But if it does, it will sit alongside other related stories by other authors in other languages, each enriching the complex web of stories and knowledges contained in the archive.

Grounding the archive

Another example may help us further develop our work of grounding the archive. In another version of the Yirritja floodwater story, an elder from a different clan told of the water as it arrives at a place called Dhalinybuy. He explored the detail from his ancestral song referring to how the water starts welling up in the ground adjacent to the water ways, and the grass starts crying and the frog croaks with joy and relief:

> When the water wells up inside Wangurri country, it starts to flow … and it talks … water with sound in its mouth – 'agreeing, negotiating, consulting, stating and empowering'. … This means that when Yolŋu advise and admonish each other the land tells the law straight. These … leaves and sticks, palm fronds and bits of paperbark the … water is carrying down the river… are bits of 'information, knowledge, wisdom, intellectual research'. Near the mouth of the river is a … bar where everything, anything comes together for agreement, and lays down the law '*rom*' – so that everything on the other side will be good. The water on the other 'agreement' side is no longer rippling, it is calm … everyone comes to agreement.[4]

Leaves and sticks, information and knowledge, coming to a negotiation place for agreement making and laying down the law. What must be done to ensure that knowledge work engaging the archive remains faithful to the 'both-ways' tradition?

First we have to ensure that the digital artefacts which come to the surface bear within them the signs of their own histories and locatedness – whether through the interface maps which to some extent 'places' each story, or the faithfully digitised objects which preserve the scratches, scribbles, annotations and flyspots from the original documents. But, more importantly, common ground is created through the work which is done activating the possibilities for connections to be (re)forged between readers of the different texts and the story owners' languages and places to which they belong. Metadata contained within the book is faithfully reproduced in the archive, but can be supplemented by local knowledge of stories and people associated with each book. The database contains details (hidden from public view) of people in communities who are willing to collaborate with interested users to explore these stories, languages, cultures and people, and the project team is exploring different ways to encourage and facilitate such connections. The collection policy of the Living Archive allows for e-books and other derivatives of the original resources to be added to the archive if they have been produced with the permission and support of their owners.

Early in the development of the online archive, user testing was conducted to gauge what was working well in the Living Archive and what needed improvement. In a few cases we had supplemented an existing digital object by uploading an audio recording to the repository; in other cases we had experimented with the creation of

4 http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/yaci/pdf/Buthimang_Gularri.pdf

talking books in which a sound file had been added into a book itself. What was surprising was how well users responded to the availability of audio. So it was decided to create some prototypes and explore different ways of creating and delivering such multimedia items. However, out of respect for the original contributors (the artists and writers who created the content we had digitised) we wanted to encourage e-book development in partnership with them rather than aiming for individually produced derivatives. The latter would have been quicker to do, for sure, and we may have achieved some clever results in that way, but the latter approach was favoured because it ensured that the work of our teams was always aligned to the authority of Aboriginal story tellers, illustrators and writers.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the archive is to be seen as a resource for the creation of common ground between Aboriginal knowledge authorities and those who would work with them on their terms and in their languages – whether these learners be interested students and researchers of all ages and many places – or the new generation of Aboriginal young people joining their elders in reproducing the creative work of their ancestors. Such activities can be incorporated into existing structures, for example an assessment task in the course 'Learning A Central Australian Language 1' from the Bachelor of Indigenous Languages and Linguistics (BILL) course requires students to find appropriate materials on the Living Archive to work with. Another linguist suggested working with people in community to translate titles of some language materials in the archive into English to improve accessibility for users who don't speak the language.

We can think of the process of carefully and collaboratively accessing the resources of the digital archive under the supervision of Aboriginal authorities, as a process of actually *producing* common ground – momentary and situated – in which we learn to negotiate ways of going on together keeping these languages and cultures alive. It is yet to be seen what may happen on this common ground once it has been created.

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This book was developed out of the Batchelor Institute 40 year celebrations held in 2014. A significant element of those celebrations was a conference, and some of the chapters in this book are based on papers presented at that conference, with others responding to ideas and prompts that emerged. The central theme of the book, like the conference, is finding common ground, and the chapters in this collection provide wide ranging perspectives on that theme: some take the form of stories, others are provocative, some review process, while others report on the changing perspectives in education and communities. Reflecting the Batchelor Institute commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, this volume presents a rich tapestry of reflections on finding common ground at Batchelor Institute and beyond by an exciting range of authors.