

# Lifestyle

## Tales to tell

Thanks to technology, hard work and government grants, a team at CDU is ushering thousands of endangered stories into the worldwide digital age

By COURTNEY TODD



CDU's Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages - Technology, hard work and some much appreciated government grants have allowed a team of CDU academics to collect and digitise thousands of children's books written in different indigenous languages and make them available to the public online

TECHNOLOGY is an amazing thing. Just five years ago most Australian schoolchildren considered a book a physical object that could only be in one place, at one time.

Now children all over the world can access the same virtual book at the same time.

It is that advancement that has seen the creation of Charles Darwin University's Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages.

The aim of the LAAL project is to preserve more than 4000 books, recordings and audio-visual materials in 25 indigenous languages, then make them available to the public.

CDU Professor of Education and project leader Professor Michael Christie said researchers have travelled thousands of kilometres throughout the NT in search of the endangered literature, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s, to build the digital archive.

"Thousands of books and school materials were produced in Australian indigenous languages by Aboriginal people across the NT," he said.

"The stories are valuable tools chronicling indigenous cultural heritage, and range from environmental knowledge to traditional practices, oral literature, ethnobotany and history."

Dr Brian Devlin, Chief Investigator at CDU, said the collection will be of key significance to remote schools in the NT, where new educational policies emphasise bilingual learning.

Dr Devlin, who works on the project with Dr Christie, project manager and CDU linguist Cathy Bow and the CDU Library, said what they have been able to achieve so far has been exciting.

"About 2000 books are completely ready... and over 500 of these are publicly available right now on the website ([www.cdu.edu.au/laal](http://www.cdu.edu.au/laal))," he said.

"Another 1500 books are in various stages of digitisation and are being prepared for upload."

### A labour of love

IT HAS taken many man hours to reach this stage.

"It's quite a complex process because there are both the physical materials to

locate and also the metadata associated with them," Dr Devlin said.

"We initially bought the metadata from the national library - all the information they had about every Aboriginal book produced in the Territory - to use as a starting point."

From there researcher developed spreadsheets, which showed where the holes were.

"In schools back in the 1970s and 1980s people were developing and producing materials trying to keep pace with the nice-looking English materials."

"That was their priority. Making sure there was an adequate cataloguing system was sometimes a bit secondary."

"The National Library, the State Library of NSW, the NT Library - they were supposed to receive a copy of everything produced in the '70s and '80s. They didn't always, so there are gaps."

Researchers searched libraries, visited remote schools and sourced materials from whoever and wherever they could.

Some books were in pristine condition. Others were found in old boxes in dusty sheds.

"Getting the permissions to go with those materials isn't straight forward either," Dr Devlin said.

"I've got onto buses, I've gone down to the beach, I've found people in all sorts of places."

Once they had permission, the material was scanned and photographed. These images were then run through optical character recognition software.

### The digital age

THE next stage was digitisation.

"Because (the books were written) in many different Aboriginal languages and optical character recognition software is geared to read English, French, Spanish and so on, we have to correct it as well," Dr Devlin said.

"Then we upload it to the site. The process is quite time consuming."

Dr Devlin said the right permission, combined with modern technology, means a child in Millingimbi can pick up an iPad and read a story in their own language, while a child in Sydney can read the English translation.

Researchers can enhance the original books by adding audio files of them being read in the language they were written, interactive maps and video files.

"We have this story, *The Moon Killed People*, which was published in the 1970s by a lovely old guy called Djawa and we've asked his granddaughter Waymamba to read it," Dr Devlin said.

"So (in one e-book) we've got the story, we've got the illustration from the original book, we've got the sound of Waymamba reading, and we can go to a (written) English translation."

### A group effort

DR DEVLIN said considering iPads and iPhones weren't around five years ago, it's extraordinary what his team is now able to do.

"One of the most exciting parts is what I'd like to think could happen at a community level," he said.

"People with their iPads or iPhones can think 'I can do this. I'm going to work on this story or that story because it belongs to my clan or my uncle did this'."

Government funding received in early 2012 allowed stage one of this valuable project to begin. It has received another \$500,000 from the Australian Research Council (ARC).

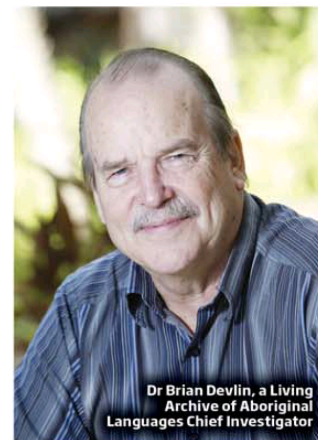
"For stage two we want to establish really good working relationships," Dr Devlin said.

"We're hoping the Australian National University will be involved."

"The Batchelor Institute is going to be involved in what we call search and rescue, where people get their hands on more of these materials in more of these languages, so it will be a richer collection. Catholic Education is going to become a partner as well."

Dr Devlin said on a worldwide level he hopes international scholars will be connecting to LAAL, while nationally educators will use the resource to teach schoolchildren about Aboriginal culture and language.

To get involved use the feedback form at <http://laal.cdu.edu.au/feedback/>



Dr Brian Devlin, a Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages Chief Investigator



CDU's Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages - Technology