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Higher education service learning with First Peoples of Australia

Dawn Bennett

Curtin University, Perth, GPO Box U1987, WA 6845
dawn.bennett@curtin.edu.au

Naomi Sunderland

Griffith University, Brisbane, University Drive, Meadowbrook, QLD 4131
n.sunderland@griffith.edu.au

Anne Power

University of Western Sydney, Sydney, Locked Bag 1797 Penrith 2751, NSW Australia
am.power@uws.edu.au

Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, PO Box 3428, South Brisbane, QLD, 4101
b.bartleet@griffith.edu.au

Australian higher education institutions face increasing pressure to institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture at every level of activity. In this paper, which takes as its context a three-university service-learning initiative with First Peoples of Australia, we argue that service-learning opportunities develop students who are more culturally responsive, adaptable and aware. In this instance we position service learning as a strategy through which Australian universities and colleges might promote Indigenous cultural content for students, faculty and the broader community. We report the experiences of a funded, arts-based service learning initiative in which creative arts students (n=70) and pre-service teachers (n=37) worked with over 290 Aboriginal community members in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia. The study adopted an action research approach and we combined a range of conceptual-theoretical resources with the voices and experiences of the students, academic researchers and community members. Our study data confirmed the potential for service learning to build valuable intercultural competencies amongst higher education students, fostering critical engagement with racial politics and a shift in extant views of cultural diversity. Participating students developed a deeper awareness of their past experiences and a greater sensitivity towards forms of social and cultural oppression. Deeper critical engagement with the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities prompted students to be more responsive in their critiques of the cultural politics of their own educational experiences. As they gained confidence and self-assuredness, students learned to draw on their past experiences and perceptions to adapt to diverse expectations and contexts.

Keywords: arts-based service learning; Indigenous; first peoples, higher education

Introduction

Service learning combines service and learning objectives designed to benefit both service recipient and provider (Furco, 1996). Service learning has emerged as an effective and powerful means by which universities can embed Australian First Peoples' perspectives and cultures into undergraduate and postgraduate coursework. Arts-based service learning (ABSL) places art "in a community context as both a creative practice and a teaching method to fulfil arts-based educational objectives ranging from creative self-expression to competency with discipline-specific standards" (Krensky & Steffen 2008, p. 15). Distinguished from general service learning by the fact that the arts are at the core of the service-learning experience, ABSL is a powerful way of connecting students and community members and promoting community arts practice.

ABSL engages students in "empathetic social interaction" (Jeffers 2009, p. 19) through which they explore, affirm and question their own values and cultural positions, question their understanding of social challenges and history, gain confidence in diverse cultural interactions, and consider their personal roles in invoking social change (Molnar 2010). Despite these benefits, little attention has been given to specific applications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia or elsewhere. It is this focus that frames our work.

Key concepts

The formulation of our ABSL programs has been guided by five significant central concepts: relationships, reflexivity, reciprocity, respect and representation. As we have documented elsewhere (Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014), perhaps the most important of these is the process of building *relationships*, which prompts participants to engage in deeply reflexive processes about their racial subjectivities, cultural biases and assumptions. The formation of these relationships takes time. It also precedes any significant creative or cultural work, which can sometimes create tensions between ABSL and the structured and goal-oriented nature of university learning. Relationships are also strongly connected to the related concept of *reciprocity*, which can be defined as the active, two-way exchange of creative and cultural knowledge (Dostilio et al., 2012).

In ABSL, partners can include individuals such as a staff member at a community arts organization, faculty member or student, and/or an organization such as a regional arts organization or a university. This "web of democratic and reciprocal partnerships" (Jacoby, 2003, p. 1) highlights both the potential for social and systemic change and the challenge of multiple perspectives and expectations. It is the process of relationship building and reciprocity that prompts students to engage in deeply reflexive processes about their own cultural subjectivities, biases and assumptions.

Reflexivity encourages students to see themselves as both self and "other", and to understand "how the self is implicated in the construction of Otherness" (Giroux, 1992, p. 32). Processes of reciprocity and reflexivity resonate with the notion of asset-based service-learning, which promotes respect for community members as capable agents and partners (Nakata, 1998) rather than "people in need of being saved" (Molnar, 2010, p. 11). Through this approach, we have seen students develop a stronger appreciation of diverse Aboriginal cultures. Students

have also recognised their limited previous understanding of Aboriginal Australia and, at times, their own complicity in suppressing or dismissing First Peoples cultures in Australia.

Bringle, et al. (2009) posit that the closer the relationship, the greater the integrity and equity. Relationships and generative reciprocity are evidenced through multiple activities and processes, discussions and cultural exchanges. To ensure *respectful representation* of these encounters, and to adhere to cultural protocols, this representation is carefully negotiated to avoid “colonised” accounts that adopt Western ways of learning, teaching and research. Appropriate forms of representation are equally important during the planning, implementation and reporting phases of service-learning programs. As members of primarily mainstream Australian (European-heritage) cultural groups ourselves, we have worked collaboratively and humbly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and partners to move toward these decolonising ways of working and representing.

In this paper we first discuss arts-based service learning in the context of our work within Australia, and then we summarise some of the benefits and impacts of this work for students. This is followed by discussion of an ABSL framework we have developed collectively from our programs, as well as the implications and possibilities this framework holds for practice. We end by drawing out some of the key lessons we have learnt in this work in the hope of encouraging broader ABSL engagement and to highlight the importance of developing Indigenous cultural awareness in all students.

Arts-based service learning in context

Arts-based service learning engages university students with place and communities and impacts students’ emerging professional identities as musicians, journalists, media professionals and teachers (Power & Bennett, 2015). We mention these career choices because they are the students with whom we have worked, but we are confident that our findings will translate to a wider spectrum of students. Reflection has been central to the research we have conducted with undergraduates and post-graduates. In several papers we have drawn on the reflections of student participants in service learning as well as the insightful comments of community members (Bartleet, et. al. 2014b; Power, et al., 2014). Our motivation here is built on Mobely’s assertion that integrating diversity into service learning is best achieved through “mindful service-learning” (2011, p. 89), which fosters reflection and requires students to be aware of their own historical and cultural perspectives. Consequently, we have found a different response than that described by Tuck (2009) where he writes that research in Indigenous communities and contexts has operated on a ‘flawed theory’ and ‘damaged-centered’ approach which has ‘reinforced’ and ‘reinscribed’ Indigenous communities and their people in a deficit view as ‘depleted’ and ‘hopeless’ In our research, whether the experience has been located in the centre of Australia or in the region of the university at which the students studied, the impact has often been transformative. The learning has been reciprocal and enriching.

Our collaborative work began with a funded, arts-based service learning initiative in which creative arts students (n=70) and pre-service teachers (n=37) worked with over 290 Aboriginal community members in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia. Once ethical approvals were granted, students were invited to participate in one of three service-learning programs in which they would work with Aboriginal community members on community led projects. Two of these were located in Tennant Creek in Australia’s Northern Territory, and the third was located in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. Each program incorporated

intercultural training and orientation together with discipline-specific and practical support for students.

The study adopted an action research approach and we combined a range of conceptual-theoretical resources with the voices and experiences of the students, academic researchers and community members. In each of our universities' initial interactions with community Elders, we have been conscious of making space, a concept drawn from reconciliation efforts between the Canadian government and First Nations (Regan, 2010). Making space removes ideas of power being assumed by university outsiders through a process of non-actively "being with" community members to build rapport, familiarity and trust. This exemplifies "sitting down on country", making time to listen and not rush in to activity – a principle we have adopted each time we have returned to community. It shows respect for the community's need to know their partners. As Steinman (2011) has written, the value of such non-action encounters can be realised only by adequately preparing university students to encourage more respect and to integrate Indigenous perspectives.

Each of our university's projects has involved consultation and cultural training. In Tennant Creek, located in central Australia, our pre-project consultations with the community involved the High School executive, Elders at the Language Centre and staff at nearby Winanjikari Music Centre and Barkly Regional Arts. Cultural training at Tennant Creek was delivered by the Aunties at the *Papulu Aparr-Kari* Language Centre. In Aboriginal culture, Aunties are wise women who are guardians of respect and rules of behaviour (Robertson, Demosthenous & Demosthenous, 2005). At the Language Centre, students learned about skin relationships and received a skin name. In so doing, they came to understand how skin names relate to the organisation of local Aboriginal communities, from marriage to all the circumstances of daily life, including their responsibilities to each other. Such responsibilities remain a way of managing life and they ensure common understandings about ceremonial business and obligations to the land. When cultural training has been localised at or near the university, students have engaged with Aboriginal people in workshops that introduce Noongar culture and history. We have found in these cases that engaging students with the history of the place from an Aboriginal perspective opens new understandings about familiar sites.

As a consequence of cultural training, students have spoken of the changing way in which they see their personal and professional roles. We argue that, with our students, we begin to discern, question and rupture previously invisible dominant power relations (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). We contend that these ruptures, and the resulting reorientation of our personal and collective visions and hopes for the future, are at the center of sustaining positive outcomes for arts-based service learning. Our aim has been to encourage students to develop cultural competence and rethink possible ethnocentric and racist assumptions. We see this as directly connected with their work readiness in a diverse society. This is the aspect that touches all aspects of higher education. From the perspective of contesting power relations that shape interactions with others, service learning emerges as a pedagogical strategy that can instigate personal and broader societal change.

Among the students are those who have returned to work in Indigenous communities as well as those who have discovered the benefits of working with communities closer to home. Students' lived experiences have changed their world views and their readiness to work collaboratively and respectfully with others. We also found that career aspirations changed: for example, a drama pre-service teacher returned to Tennant Creek High School and taught there for three years. A visual arts teacher returned to work with local arts organisation Barkly

Regional Arts. Likewise, a music student who participated in 2009 returned to Tennant Creek and the surrounding communities after graduating, and is now co-manager of the Winanjikari Music Centre.

Ways of knowing, being and doing

Consistent with Molnar (2010) and others (Russell-Bowie 2007; [Thomas & Mulvey, 2008](#)) we believe that ABSL programs can lead to a culturally sensitive and enabling process for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. This assertion is made on the basis that the arts “foster interpersonal expression and empathy, individual control over personal expression and identity, and non- or extra-linguistic intercultural communication” (Bartleet, Bennett, Power and Sunderland, forthcoming). As we have observed, students working in partnership with rural and remote Aboriginal communities have begun to learn about the complexities of intercultural sharing and understand and appreciate Australian Aboriginal cultures. By taking time to know their students and to understand the challenges they face, pre-service teachers have experienced transforming experiences in their cultural immersion and have begun to (re)shape their teacher identities. Their attitudes and even career goals have been positively transformed not only through their reflexive practice, but through interviews and discussions with community members, peers and school executive.

Arts students working in collaboration with Aboriginal communities in the rural and remote Central Desert region of Australia have experienced enriching learning experiences led not by teachers but by Elders and the community. These active learning opportunities have moved beyond disciplinary boundaries and have signalled a growing commitment to educating the visiting students (see also [Sandy & Holland, 2006](#)). Moreover, in order to participate in a genuinely reciprocal way, students have developed artistic skills beyond the scope of their higher education courses.

Students who have worked in partnership with Aboriginal communities in their own city (Perth) have started to view familiar places in a different way. They have begun to question the meaning of words such as “country” and “place”, and to question the general lack of Indigenous content in their school and university studies. Listening to local Aboriginal stories about country and spirituality, and working in partnership with community members over the course of a semester, many students have forged relationships that continued beyond the ABSL program. The inclusion of screen arts and journalism students in this program has prompted wide-ranging discussions about negativity in the media and personal commitments that students’ future practices will seek to challenge the negative and stereotypical representation that dominates mainstream media ([Dreher, 2010](#)).

When distilling some of the aforementioned observations and insights gathered from our students and community members, as well as analysing significant amounts of data collected during our programs, we have come to realise that these ABSL programs embody three interconnected ways of learning. These can be framed as Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing. When fleshing out how these three ways of learning can occur in ABSL, we have found inspiration in Aboriginal scholar Karen *Booran Mirraboopa* Martin’s (2003) descriptions of a Quandamooka worldview that encapsulates these three elements. As we have documented elsewhere, these three ways of learning have important implications for communities and universities in terms of how they approach collaborating and engaging with one another (Bartleet, Bennett, Power & Sunderland, forthcoming).

Ways of knowing

Ways of Knowing can be learned and reproduced through processes of sitting, watching, waiting, listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, responding, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, creating, assessing, modelling, engaging and applying (Martin, 2003). These Ways of Knowing can also entail processes that expand and contract in response to various contextual factors. As such, this way of framing ABSL incorporates sensitivity towards contexts as well as processes. When it comes to engaging in this way, whether the ABSL program involves travelling to a remote, far away country or rediscovering the country on which one regularly walks, we have found a very necessary step is to slow down, observe and connect with the country and its people. When value is placed on respecting and learning about Aboriginal culture and worldviews from Elders and artists in this way, we begin to take a vital step towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content in a way that privileges the holders of that content. This will most likely ensure a much deeper engagement for all concerned.

Ways of being

As we have outlined above, relationships are what determine and define for everyone how to connect to country, how team members interact with those collaborating on the program, and ultimately how the team relate to themselves – in other words, our Ways of Being (Martin, 2003). We found that in our ABSL programs our community collaborators guided this relational way of learning and engaging. Whether it was explaining how the team connected to our collaborators in the kinship system after receiving a skin name, or evoking the expected reciprocity in relationships by asking for favours, our collaborators steered the process of how the students related to others, and modelled to them how they should behave and respond as a result. In terms of engagement, we have found that this involves the very necessary step of taking the time to develop trusting relationships with people and partners. These relationships underpin everything that is learned and experienced on these ABSL programs, and without them any kind of meaningful engagement is impossible. The asset-based approach to service learning (Guffey, 2008) allows us to become attuned to the reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways in which participants learn from one another in these contexts. When viewed this way *all* participants are active learners with something valuable to share.

Ways of doing

In our ABSL sub-projects, our Ways of Doing became a synthesis and articulation of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being. These Ways of Doing could be seen in the arts practices with which teams engaged, in the cultural customs and events in which team members participated, in the ways in which teams followed protocols, and in the ways team members engaged with one another (Martin, 2003). As we have suggested above, arts-based processes commonly provide culturally appropriate forms of expression, communication and connection with one another, and provide an opportunity to creatively share life experiences and appreciate one another's strengths. However, when designing ABSL programs with First Peoples, a delicate balance needs to be achieved between these oftentimes organic arts-based processes, meeting community needs and meeting university requirements in terms of resourcing, recruitment, assessment, curriculum design and policy compliance. A sense of shared ownership is vital for negotiating such issues and ensuing on-going, mutual engagement.

Implications for practice

Arts based service learning offers students, facilitators, and community partners an effective way to develop new or reimagined ways of knowing, being and doing as part of an embodied and emplaced learning dialogue. The specific nature and benefits of ABSL which seeks to transform ways of knowing, being and doing offer a number of challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning practice within universities and the arts more generally. Here we discuss what we see to be three key implications of our work for practice in Australian colleges and universities.

First, as indicated in this paper, developing new ways of knowing, being and doing is an inherently dialogic and interdependent process that produces dialogic and interdependent results. In pursuing ABSL we are in essence attempting to avoid any situation where a student could change their ways of doing (e.g. by following a “checklist” for cultural protocols) without the accompanying self reflexive change in ways of knowing and being. Hence, while ABSL activities and related student assessment may target one aspect of this dialogic process (e.g. ways of knowing), shifts in one area of practice will intimately affect other areas. Student assessments for ABSL hence need to illuminate the changes in dialogic ways of knowing, being and doing. Students and facilitators should also be prepared to respond to the fact that while their own ways of knowing, being and doing may have shifted during their ABSL experience and subsequent learning, societal and institutional settings may have remained static. As such, we recommend that students, facilitators, and curricular developers be equipped with appropriate preparation and understanding around advocacy work. This taps into broader ongoing conversations about the potential for ABSL and the arts more generally to effect social change for social justice (see for example Mitchell, 2007; Boyle-Baise and Langford, 2004; [Parkinson and White, 2013](#)).

Second, our research indicates that while ABSL with Indigenous communities typically has immediate and profound significance for students, these experiences are often the “tip of the iceberg” that precipitates further learning (see [Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Clark, 2007](#)). While we know that many of the students who participated in our research refigured their conception of their *future* professional selves and ways of knowing, being and doing as a result of their engagement, we know little about the long term transformative learning outcomes of ABSL experiences for students. More research is required on what happens to students once they finish their ABSL experience. This would include more detailed examination of the university and community based learning opportunities, relationships, and networks that can support students to continue processes of learning and self-transformation.

Third, it is well-established that “learning about” or “helping” other cultures through some forms of cultural awareness training and service learning can reinforce racist ideologies and cultural “othering” (see for example Boyle-Baise, 1999; [Kumas-Tan et al., 2007](#)). While we have emphasised the importance of asset-based and community-led ABSL as one antidote to dominant racist deficit discourses on Indigenous peoples in Australia, we assert that a critical approach to ABSL and the broader arts curriculum is also required (see Boyle-Baise, 1999 for an explanation of different philosophical approaches to service learning). Here we acknowledge that a primary aim for ABSL is for culturally privileged non Indigenous arts students to challenge their understandings of *their own* racial, cultural, political, and economic positionality and how it has impacted upon Indigenous peoples, rather than simply learning about “the cultural other”. In essence, the ways of knowing, being and doing that students need to most understand, may be their own. This critical inquiry can happen through ABSL

activities within communities as well as in preparatory, orientation, and debriefing activities and the broader curriculum. If we are to promote the social justice potential of the arts, we should learn from other disciplines such as education and social work which overtly identify and challenge whiteness ideologies as a core element of professional education (see for example [Nylund, 2006](#); [Mackinlay, 2005](#); [Marx, 2004](#)).

Concluding comments

We frame ABSL work with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a holistic and effective activity that fulfils a number of contemporary aims and imperatives in higher education. First, ABSL fulfils the imperative in Australian universities to enhance the availability and recognition of diverse First Peoples' cultural content in higher education curricula. It does this by creating space and time for students to sit down with, learn from, and work alongside diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and community members. Through this process students are exposed to ways of knowing, being and doing that are culturally safe and responsive for diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Second, ABSL provides a forum outside the typical higher education classroom where community members can become teachers. This inversion of the classroom and university-community relationship allows for community members to teach and mentor students in ways that they deem to be culturally, socially, politically and personally appropriate. This contributes in at least some way to the aims of decolonising higher education and liberating community members and students alike from Western assimilationist classroom settings for teaching and learning. Third, ABSL projects provide an opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to challenge and develop both their professional and personal ways of knowing, being and doing in settings that require them to combine learning with practice. This contributes to the broader continuum of activities that we may regard as “work integrated learning”, experiential learning, and professional competence training.

Finally, ABSL operationalises and enhances the potential of the arts to contribute to social change and social justice. Through critical and asset-based approaches to ABSL in particular, students are empowered to explore their own cultural identities, positionality, and potentially unacknowledged complicity in racism, cultural suppression of Indigenous peoples and ongoing colonisation. Through these processes students are able to develop and enact ways of knowing, being and doing that are emancipatory and socially just both for community partners and themselves.

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