LOCAL VERSUS GLOBAL KNOWLEDGES: A FUNDAMENTAL DILEMMA IN 'REMOTE EDUCATION'

Michael Christie
Charles Darwin University
Northern Territory

ABSTRACT

When 'remote education' is seen as something which is delivered from some outside (by definition not remote) agency, rather than something which is grown at home, it is usually constructed as a problem of disadvantage: how do we deliver to remote students the quality cosmopolitan education we offer to kids in the city? Equality of educational opportunity is equated with uniformity of curriculum. But in the Northern Territory, many of the recipients of very remote educational delivery live very deliberately by choice in very remote places because they want to be in control of their young peoples' education (including cultural transmission), and need to be able to do this on their own land, knowing it and caring for it and each other, and making sure that new generations are grown up to continue to renew it. This paper is about what I have learnt about the local nature of knowledge in my involvement in remote education in the north.

INTRODUCTION: THREE PERSPECTIVES ON REMOTE EDUCATION

I have had three quite divergent, often contrasting experiences of remote education, and this paper is an attempt to reconcile them. The first is of people finding space in very remote places to build their lives in contexts in which place, identity, language, and history are foregrounded. This experience derives from 25 years working with Aboriginal people mostly in very remote places in eastern Arnhem Land. The second is with the policies and practices of people who are struggling to deliver educational services from relatively less to relatively more remote places, this experience coming largely from my last eight months working in the School of Education at Charles Darwin University in Darwin. The third is with the academic and non-academic theories of epistemology and pedagogy which inform questions of place, identity, and knowledge.

I will start by telling you briefly about each of the three perspectives, addressing specifically how space and telecommunications are at work in these narratives. First the view from the remote place.

A remote perspective: Milingimbi

I arrived at Milingimbi, in Arnhem Land in 1972. The Methodist mission had recently abandoned its school to the Welfare Department of the Northern Territory and I was employed as first a teacher, and then with the advent of bilingual education as teacher-linguist. Our food was delivered four times a year, we had no phone, and only VHF radio (apart from a little short wave from the South American Andes). As white teachers

we didn't actually have anyone much to talk to on a VHF radio, but Yolngu, the local Aboriginal people, put it to constant use. Every isolated camp had a radio connected to a battery which constantly broadcast ongoing conversation among other centres. Conversations were in a variety of Yolngu and non-Yolngu languages. Overlaid upon each other, and backed by loud whistling and static, shrill voices in strange languages made arrangements to visit each other for ceremonies and hunting parties, letting each other know about people's movements and well-being. Often the whole camp was silent craning to hear some important news, and at other times it was just a dull whistle in the background. Yolngu were more active using telecommunications technology than were we white fellas because the very portable, hardy and reliable two-way interactive technology suited their economic, social and religious needs perfectly. In a very few of those same locations, thirty years later, there now stand phone booths which, when working, provide a similar but more private (i.e. individual) system of communication, as well as good sources of revenue to telecommunication companies.

The 1970s and 1980s were exciting times in those small communities, for many reasons. One was because Aboriginal languages, cultures, governance structures and knowledge traditions were all being seriously engaged in the schools (sometimes of course, much more successfully than others), and another was because the government policy at that time was to support the homeland centre movement where people would be given the opportunity to start up outstations on their traditional lands, and would be given the infrastructural support to develop and maintain viable communities.

Governments of all colours and at many levels have over more recent years all but abandoned their commitment to bilingual education, and to homeland centres. These days, in those relatively few places where traditional knowledge practices are alive in Aboriginal schools, and where Aboriginal homeland centres thrive, this is the case *in spite of* radical disinvestment on the part of governments. Today we speak about the 'delivery' of remote education, a strange metaphor which leads us to assume that education, along with health, can somehow be delivered like the mail or the milk.

The desire of people to move to traditional lands and start up homeland centres was always as much an educational imperative as an economic or religious one. From the Yolngu perspective, one could participate properly in the growing up of young children, only if they were in the right place, with the right people, and away from some of the bad influences of settlement life.

Today the difference between the large Aboriginal settlements, and the homeland centres, is marked. Many of the larger settlements (most of which are ex-missions) are relatively unhappy and unhealthy places when compared with homeland centres, or even in fact compared with living in the long grass and on the beaches of Darwin. This is borne out by a wide range of research from Indigenous perspectives on social capital theory (Christie & Greatorex, 2004b), governance (Christie & Greatorex, 2004a), health benefits of living on homeland centres (Eastwell, 1979; McDermott et al., 1998; Reid, 1983), to Yolngu research on the reasons why many Yolngu move from major settlements on to the streets of Darwin (Downing, 1988; Maypilama et al., 2004; Reid, 1983).

There are many reasons for this decline in Aboriginal communities, and the disaffection which it brings, but I want to focus specifically on the Yolngu educational perspective.

In collaborative research engagements, Yolngu most often start by reorienting white Australian researchers into the theories of place, language and identity which lie at the heart of their research and educational practice. There is something in the Aboriginal imagination which always has, always will link a good quality education to place, and to place consciousness. This is also true of many non-Aboriginal people who choose to live in rural and remote centres precisely because they want a non-urban life experience for their children, and we need to embrace that fact, and celebrate it. I will later return to the issues of place, identity and learning, but first, the view from the 'centre'.

The View from the Centre: Canberra

Looking from the point of view of government policy, the first part of the 'problem of remote and rural education' (as for example in the *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*, 2000) arises from pessimism over the decline of the rural sector, largely as a result of global forces which have led to rural recession. This had begun with the negative effects of international market competition, and continued into the decline of supporting businesses in remote communities, the eventual prognosis being the rundown of commercial and retail activities and services (Australian Government 1991). This Canberra view (one of many 'metro-centric' views) gave rise to a compensatory agenda aimed at keeping up the national standards of education, especially in disadvantaged rural areas, ultimately to ensure that primary industries remain 'productive, competitive, innovative and in tune with international market requirements' (Australian Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1989).

If for example, 'rural and remote students are especially disadvantaged by difficulties in attracting specialist staff, limited curriculum options, and (inability) to pursue their particular interests or talents because of scarce resources at the school level' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2000), we are not going to be able to address that disadvantage through a quantum determined by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy or the (then) Department of Human Services and Health (The RRMA or the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas classification), or the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (the ARIA or Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia). The bureaucrats and academics who argue about relative merits of remoteness indices as measures of disadvantage, become blind to the ways in which solutions to community problems (whether they be remote, rural or urban) emerge from a community knowing its history, its strengths and its goals, and being able to work collaboratively with government to realise them.

The second problem arising from the centralist perspective is the nervous insistence that the English literacy and numeracy achievement of urban students should be equalled as a matter of rights, by remote students. It is difficult to know where these universalising government impulses come from, but they are persistent and powerful. They have for example led to a fierce commitment to bringing English literacy and numeracy achievement in remote Aboriginal classrooms up towards national benchmarks, at the expense of bilingual education, and the employment of good number of Aboriginal Education Worker positions throughout the Northern Territory. This is in fact quite consistent with the National Enquiry into Rural and Remote education which has recommended that curriculum 'be outcomes based so that comparative data can ensure the adequate resourcing of schools and students who may need intensive compensatory education' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2000, p48).

The NT Minister for Education has again only this morning reiterated that when only 78% of remote students attain national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, it is a national disgrace. He hasn't been shamed or alarmed that schools are doing almost nothing to keep traditional ecological knowledge alive in remote communities. Here I am not referring exclusively to Aboriginal knowledge; anyone who lives on and loves country develops ecological knowledge which is transmitted to young people who have the opportunity, the support and the motivation to learn it. The minister doesn't seem alarmed that schools are disinvesting in keeping local languages and cultural forms of knowledge management alive.

In short, the failure of policy and government practice to make remote education work optimally for the people and places where it is found arises from two highly contestable assumptions: that remoteness implies lack, and that justice implies sameness. In order to counter that, we need to conceptualise our system as one in which remoteness implies particular assets and benefits in particular places, and justice implies diversity, polyvocality, and situated judgement.

Views of theorists of place, identity and knowledge

Yolngu aspirations for truly remote education and its construction as a problem by central administrations seem, literally, worlds apart. However a closer look at Yolngu and academic theories of place, identity and knowledge may help us find a way to reconfigure our understanding of rural and remote education.

We do well to start with a close examination of the notion of 'remote'. People from the bush, quite naturally and appropriately, often problematise the notion of remote. Pat Dodson used to refer to 'that remote city of Canberra'. Remoteness depends on your point of view, the particular frame that you use. If you live on an island in the Arafura Sea, clearly you wake up each morning in the centre of the universe. It is Darwin and Canberra which are remote. Using a deconstructive process the term remote automatically seems to position us as the second term in a binary, the first term of which hardly exists. When we are remote we are not remote from a single, unified centre. Our remoteness is a function of power located in many different faraway contexts.

When we talk of our work in terms of rural or remote education, we fall easily into the trap of defining our remoteness negatively, in terms of *what we aren't* (cosmopolitan), *where we aren't* (in the city, close to services), and *what we can't do* (deliver the same range and quality of education as is available to urban students).

To redefine ourselves positively is a difficult quest because remoteness implies heterogeneity. Each remote place is different from the last *because of* its remoteness. Our definition must resist totalising our many experiences of many places and stories. We are special precisely because each of our places is different, and we become different because of those places.

So then, what do rural and remote communities have in common throughout Australia which we can name and foreground in such a way that it will allow us to preserve our many differences, but celebrate a particular sameness and develop a theory of place in education?

Firstly, we can assume by definition that the places we speak of have relatively smaller populations. If they had huge populations they would not be rural or remote. Small populations, we can assume, have more integrated social structures. The school council and the church council and the chamber of commerce and the young farmers' association all have related and interlinked constituency. Communities have a much better chance of being productively integrated into schooling, which is why collegiality in schools is such a crucial issue for remote education. Teachers and students in urban schools can free themselves of their overbearing or tedious colleagues each afternoon. Teachers and students in our smaller communities need to learn to get along with each other inside and outside school. Social capital is generated and deployed in our communities, in ways quite different from the centre, and we need to nurture these opportunities.

Second, so-called rural and remote communities are well spaced. They are relatively far apart. They are surrounded by land or sea, rather than people. This means that the people close by have a special significance, and people from far away have a special effect. If we want to understand the effect of information and communication technologies on our small, well spaced communities, we need to understand them in terms of how the technologies change our understanding of who and where we are.

Third, our smaller, well-spaced communities are relatively more consciously embedded in their environment. There are a number of reasons for this embeddedness: being small, our footprint on the land is less obvious, the traces of the physical environment are more obvious, we are more conscious of the landscape than we would be living in a big city where bush-clad hills, the grassy lowlands, the swamps and streams have been concreted over long ago. We are most often there in that environment for reasons which have to do with the environment (rather than for example the presence of a factory, or a government office). These environmental reasons may be economic (farming for example in the rural case) or political (for making an ownership claim for example, in the case of an Aboriginal outstation) or even religious (as in protecting sacred sites) or more often a mixture of all three. We need to remain clear about this embeddedness in place; we need to address our dependency upon the environment, and above all, to develop a more reflexive relationship to it for environmental as well as educational reasons.

Looking first at the Yolngu theory of place, I have already mentioned that in collaborative work between non-Aboriginal educators and Yolngu philosophers, two different Yolngu theories of knowledge production emerge (for more detail see Christie 1998). The first, which could be called identity building, relates to how Aboriginal adults 'grow up' young children in the contexts of their environment. There are many metaphors which are brought to bear upon describing the process. For example that of the hunter, who learns to recognise the traces of history in the environment, and assess anew each day the opportunities and challenges which present themselves, and has the confidence a productive and respectful life through knowing who he truly is in the context of his land, language and history (Marika-Mununggiritj, R., and Christie, M.J. 1995). Or the springs which provide your people with a focal point in your own estate, and whose waters provides you with the brain power interpreted as identity which comes from place (Marika 2002), or the strings of connectedness which relate you specifically through your own language and ancestral song, to particular ways of seeing

the world, and particular ways of dealing with people from other lineages (Garnggulkpuy 2002). This local, non-transferable, verbally inexpressible yet important and useful knowledge is what the ancient Greeks called metis. It is the knowledge which is at work when the captain of a ship arrives in a port and hands over to the pilot whose knowledge of the local winds, rocks, shipping patterns, tides, currents etc make him indispensable in that one location. It is also the knowledge which was at work when the local Indians gave the puritan settlers in the new world the rules of thumb to observe when deciding when to plant the new crops each spring (Scott 1999). It is the knowledge which is at work in organisations keeping things going during crisis, yet unacknowledged, invisible, and in fact contrary to the assumed structures and functions of the organisation (Baumard 1994).

The second Yolngu metaphor for learning relates to what happens when different knowledge traditions come together to collaborate in knowledge production. This theory of course is particularly relevant to us, because it speaks of what happens in school (where people from different places and backgrounds come together into a particular space), and may help us to see what happens on the ground where content, or resources, or staff or tele-communications are delivered from a 'remote' place – like Canberra, or Darwin, or Mildura. This is the Yolngu theory of garma, much discussed in the literature (Christie 1994; Christie 2000; Marika-Mununggiritj, R. et al. 1990; Ngurruwutthun 1991), which takes the open (non-sacred) ceremonial site and practice as a basis for understanding how fresh truths for a particular time and place can be negotiated by a diverse group of people who know their histories and their environments, and collaborate according to due process and with mutual respect. You may have heard of the annual Garma Festival which is held not far from Yirrkala, and where people from around the world are invited to share with Yolngu knowledge and culture according to a garma philosophy and process.[2]

'Garma... is an open (i.e. non-sacred) word... describing the format where a Yolngu learning environment begins' (Marika-Mununggiritj, R. 1990, p43). People from other groups who are important to the particular ceremony must be invited, and made welcome. They will all have their jobs to do, and will be carefully supervised by particular others whose ancestral task it is to make sure things are done properly. An open ceremonial ground is provided – a space where people come together from different parts of the land, and perform the ancestral stories in song, dance and art in a visible, designated forum. Thus the garma is the first necessary condition for a true Yolngu education.

Youngsters must have people in authority to tell them the stories of origins and history. Young adults must observe the work which is done by the elders and then perform themselves, through their histories and connections to provide at once images of unity, and elaborations of the differences which arise from the different places to which people belong. They must learn to participate in these processes themselves, grow into responsibility for them, and learn to produce and discern the truths which emerge from them.

Place has an interesting role here. Each group represented in the garma has its own place, its own story, its own language, but these are all connected through the logic of

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[2] see www.garma.telstra.com

ancestral travel, where travelling across the country and making it knowable the ancestors left behind people in each place, with their own languages and totems in rich networks of connectedness. Dancing a sugar-bag ancestor for example, or shark, each group performs the story as it became manifest on their own land, during the ancestral travels. There is a different understanding of geography here (as there is a different understanding of the difference between past and present). Shark dreamings all across the land have a related identity, they are co-present with other shark places, and become realised again in the garma. People's and place names, the words of ancestral songs, and sacred paintings and totemic objects make these transcendent relationships clear, and central. We shall return to this point.

In the Yolngu theory, formal school has quite a different function, structure, and process from socialization. It depends upon an agreed space, and voices (and other gestures like art and music) from a range of histories and spaces. In an extreme version of Yolngu identity theory, as I have intimated, there is in a sense no meaningful distinction between place and identity. 'There is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no 'external world' to inhabit' (Graham 1999, p113) It is wrong of course to totalise and then essentialise the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities, but we do well to remember how our identities are the product of social processes, and in some communities much work is done growing up young people with a sense of themselves grafted on to (rather than significantly distinct from) land and kin (see for example Myers 1991). In this setting we do not understand place as a sort of backdrop against which identity is developed and performed, but both are mutually constitutive – places produce people from human beings, and people produce places from spaces. This is of course no less significantly true of urban students as it is of rural or Aboriginal students.

If we want to look at academic theory of place, we need not take that extreme position, which would be informed by something like 'deep ecology' (Devall 1985), but can use theories and research in which place is foregrounded as the *context* of identity and knowledge production. The classic place-identity theorist may be Proshansky et al. (1983, p57) who argued that the 'distinction between oneself and significant others ... extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found'.

In terms of application of place identity to remote teaching, the work of Falk and Ballati (2004) identifies place as one of a range of identity resources which also include individual (age, appearance, education) and group (class, community ethnicity etc) resources. Their effort to challenge educators to 'incorporate all three dimensions of identity including place in their program design' leads to some significant suggestions as to how to rethink place in education.

This sort of analysis like the Yolngu epistemology, is useful in examining the role of places and spaces in both identity formation and education. In their interesting study of Bad Boys in Paradise, Kraak and Kenway (2002) look at the role of place in the formation of 'bad boy' identities in a coastal NSW town. There is an interesting parallel between the spaces in Paradise where young men act out their disaffection, and the garma spaces where young Aboriginal men and women act out their identities and become truly themselves. Using what they call a 'geometry of multiple differences', (p145) Kraak and Kenway elaborate 'the collisions and collusions between history and

the present, nature and culture and between generations', ultimately determining 'the changing values within the paradise community' as leading to the demonisation of Bad Boys. Local youth lost out as the shifting economic base resulted in the inscription of new meanings onto the local landscape, and contestations of public spaces, and the movement away from traditional 'fish and chips' industry (local parlance for fishing and wood chipping) again led to intergenerational identity issues between fathers and sons.

Looking finally at the question of telecommunications, I want to disagree gently with some of the implications of Kraak and Kenway's work which has resonance with the threat of globalisation argument which I identified as working at the policy level. Following Giddens (1991) they identify mass communications as somehow rendering our sense of place less real in the 'Late Modern Age'.

Giddens (wrongly I think), argues that 'in the conditions of late modernity, we live in the world *in a different sense* from in previous eras of history. Everyone continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals at every moment are contextually situated in time and place. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusions of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what the world actually is' (Giddens 1991, p187-188). Giddens identifies the technological separation of time and space, the disembedding of social institutions, and what he calls institutional reflexivity, (in which institutions literally make themselves up reflexively) as what he calls 'post-traditional' processes, constitutive of our contemporary identity. 'Place becomes thoroughly penetrated by disembedding mechanisms, which recombine the local activities into time-space relations of ever-widening scope. Place becomes phantasmagorical.' (p146)

I don't have a problem with the notion of phantasmagorical spaces and there is nothing new about them. In fact I think we can use the notion of the phantasmagoria in order to better understand the role of the local in remote and rural education. They have been alive and well in this land for 40,000 years. Ever since colonial times, there has always been something phantasmagorical about rural and remote Australia, with its mixture of colonial practices and expectations overlayed upon an Aboriginal landscape. And we have seen how place and time collapse in the context of a garma as people from near and far come together to re-create their worlds and their identities through performance.

CONCLUSION

Let us assume that the spaces in which rural or remote students learn and their teachers teach are in a sense phantasmagorical. Apparitions from another world mix with and reconfigure our embodiment in time and space. As we work from the known to the unknown, we should never assume that the known is exhausted by that embodiment. The virtual world of the internet and other remote telecommunications are just as constitutive of our students' identities and just as constitutive of the here and now.

We need to produce and maintain spaces where both the local and the global are contextualised, available and relevant, and understand our success in terms of our students' abilities to truly be themselves, appropriately and constructively, precisely where they are.

This implies a commitment to a complex understanding of knowledge as always primarily local, primarily social, and often embedded and enabled both by place, and by the wider knowledge traditions of our society – literacy, numeracy, technical knowledge, wisdom. The prioritisation of national standards of literacy and numeracy over local skills and knowledge systems needs to be balanced against our efforts to integrate learning with community histories and futures.

As teachers in remote places we are often left to juggle resources and standards imposed from outside with aspirations generated locally. Configuring them together appropriately, and allowing the students to position and perform themselves with respect to them is our primary task as educators in this context. We can't pre-empt the nature of what our students are to learn. We can't do the learning for them in advance. We can only work to create the conditions at both the individual and the community level, and facilitate that learning (which we do best if we situate ourselves as learners in the process). Each learns their own way by mixing the here and now with the positions taken from afar. The internet, remote learning and voices from afar are by their nature no more threatening to remote and rural community viability than were the VHF radios to Aboriginal people dispersed on traditional lands. We just need to learn how to contextualise them as local, moment by moment.

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