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## OUR STORY – TELLING IT

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### ABSTRACT

Research has already shown that Australian Indigenous communities are socially and economically disadvantaged. Cultural dispossession has also been identified as a key factor in the disengagement of young Indigenous people from their success in education and careers. Digital video, multimedia, and the Internet are potentially powerful tools that enable students to design and publish their own projects about meaningful real-life topics for a worldwide audience via the Internet. However, the lack of access to these technologies and appropriate training for teachers of Indigenous students may exacerbate the disparity between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. This project aims to assist the transmission of Indigenous culture through the use of multimedia technologies, thereby enhancing the educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

'Our Story – Telling IT' will culminate in the production of a CD-ROM and website that will help teachers and Indigenous students anywhere in Australia to design and build multimedia projects about their local Indigenous community and to publish them on the Internet. The testing of training resources and CD-ROM materials was conducted during 2001 and early 2002, and feedback has been extremely positive. Both the processes and products of the project emphasise collaboration with stakeholders at all stages of the project and the building of networks that support the continuance of learning communities around the telling of the local Indigenous story. This paper gives the background, theoretical framework, and methodology of the project. The project CD-ROM, and further results and conclusions, will be presented at the conference.

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### INTRODUCTION

'Our Story – Telling IT' is being developed as part of the information technology priority area within the NSW Quality Teacher Program (QTP). This program provides Commonwealth funding to all states and territories to strengthen the skills and understanding of the teaching profession.

The purpose of the project 'Our Story – Telling IT' is to enhance the learning outcomes of Indigenous students through the use of multimedia for communication. The project uses multimedia technologies to provide environments that can include video (e.g., dance, drama, story), audio (e.g., music, voice), graphics (e.g., painting, diagrams), and written text. It aims to give teachers the skills and understanding to teach and promote local and global communication in the school and the community, and across state and national boundaries.

The multimedia technologies used by the project will assist Indigenous communities to collect, organize, and publish not only information, but also artefacts, evidence, or examples of heritage, history, and culture deemed suitable by Indigenous Elders and other appropriate community members. In doing so it will provide opportunities to support the

development of a range of skills, knowledge, and understanding within the context of a powerful new medium with important implications for future job opportunities.

The process of developing and implementing the project emphasises collaboration with stakeholders at all stages. The project also emphasises and supports the process of content creation for and by the local community. This strategic approach will support ongoing links between schools and communities. The forging of these links is fundamental to the theoretical framework and practical implementation of the project. The project relies on local commitment, which is considered to be instrumental in the setting up and maintaining of lifelong-learning communities.

The project is developing two main products.

1. The CD-ROM will be a resource toolkit that enables users to collect, store, organize and publish information and examples of Indigenous heritage, history, and culture. It will contain a framework and a set of software tools to construct, edit, and upload Web pages to the project website, and also allow people to contribute documents, emails, powerpoint shows, drawings, etc. to the website. The resources currently stored on the CD-ROM are designed to help

teachers and students create and build their own website.

2. A website will house a collection of Web pages from a range of communities and schools and have links to local community sites. It will need ongoing maintenance and new pages will continually need to be developed. It will provide a way for the project to have an ongoing life, supported by and encouraged through the local community. These two products will provide the basis of a sustainable, Indigenous, learning community.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Six key principles underpin the whole project – these are as follows.

### Local ownership

It was recognised from the outset that the project would have to be driven by Indigenous communities or their representatives. It was further proposed that they would, in fact have to 'own' the project and have complete control over its processes. An article about the teaching of Indigenous Australian languages in schools from 'Inform' ("The Language of Pride", 2001), suggests that any Indigenous language program has to be driven locally if it is to be successful. It explains that the Indigenous community must feel confident and experienced in the language in order for it to be offered in the school.

The participating Indigenous communities or their representatives have direct control over the products and processes of the project. Furthermore, the project is designed to support Indigenous communities in establishing processes for the ongoing management and updating of their multimedia products and resources. The need for local ownership was reinforced in feedback from the teachers, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), and community members involved in the pilot stage of the project.

### Authentic tasks and authentic pedagogy

Advances in personal computers and digital video technology provide powerful tools for students to create, organize and publish their work. The ability to create and publish to a worldwide audience via the Internet also means that the tools are potentially more engaging than previous educational tools. This project combines the power of these tools with an authentic task: that of making a multimedia

project that is to be used by others to learn about an Indigenous Australian community. A task such as this promotes a connection from the classroom to the outside world. Lingard, Mills, & Hayes (2000) suggest that the 'Queensland Schools Reform Longitudinal Study' which they cite, identified connectedness to the world beyond the classroom as an element of 'authentic pedagogy' and an important factor in improving students' academic outcomes.

Lingard et al. analysed research relating to 'authentic pedagogy'. They found that the teacher and classroom practices that promoted effective learning and high achievement for all students could be encompassed by this term. They suggest that a significant finding in the research was that authentic pedagogy boosted the achievement of those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lingard et al. proposed that authentic pedagogy requires higher-order thinking, substantive conversations, and connections to the world outside the classroom. The research demonstrated that what made a real difference to the levels of academic achievement of disadvantaged students was the engagement with intellectually demanding pedagogies.

It is anticipated that by creating a multimedia product about their Indigenous community, Indigenous students will become more engaged in a learning environment and connected to the world outside the classroom. Through this engagement and connectedness, they may be more likely to experience intellectually demanding pedagogical practices that promote higher levels of academic achievement.

### Mindful of protocols

All communications, meetings, resources, and process structures are designed with the following aspects of Indigenous Australian culture in mind.

- There is no *single* Indigenous culture – Indigenous culture is very diverse.
- Indigenous culture is dynamic – it is not the same as it was in 1788.
- Torres Strait Islanders are of Melanesian origin with their own distinct identity and cultural traditions.
- Significant issues in the cultural identity of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include kinship, recognition and respect as a distinct people, relationship to

land and sea, and preservation of customs, law and language.

According to the previously mentioned article in 'Inform' ("The language of pride", 2001), all communications need to be done in a way that is relevant and acceptable to Indigenous peoples. For, 'Our Story – Telling IT', all project officers, committee members, teachers, and other representatives involved in any stage of the project will need to learn about and follow community protocols. The success of the work of the project reference group thus far is a testament to these practices.

### Transmission of culture and technology

The project brings together three interrelated spheres – social (inter-cultural relations), educative (vocational, technological and cultural), and cultural (re-affirmation of Indigenous cultures). Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the interactions between these spheres.

### Social

Poor health and low socio-economic status amongst the Indigenous communities throughout Australia has been investigated and documented by Batten, Frigo, Hughes, & McNamara (1998).

Additionally, Indigenous Australians today are dispersed, both geographically and culturally. Most Indigenous people live in a cash society, one not conducive to the maintenance of the Dreaming, traditional law, language, ceremonies, and values. Other groups may be living on their ancestral lands but because of dispossession and government policies, their continuity of occupation and culture may have been damaged and broken.

Past policies and practices severed the transmission of culture and beliefs. Groome (1995) says that the forced removal of children from their families

"...has impoverished a generation of Aboriginal children of their cultural heritage and identity and contributed to the huge wastage of human resources among Aborigines. Every individual, family and community has a story to tell about such losses" (p.37).

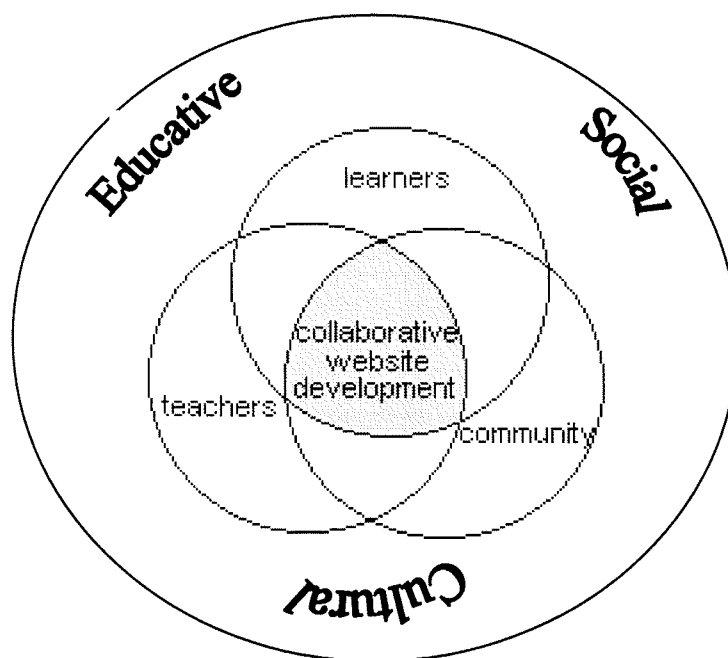


Figure 1. The interactions between social, educative, and cultural spheres.

## Cultural

The 2000 'Yarn Up' conference concluded that Indigenous young people are not learning about their culture and heritage. It stated that this has led to problems with drugs, alcohol, and identity. The conference recognised that new technology, the Internet, and multimedia are a valuable means of maintaining culture. The conference (NSW Aboriginal Seniors Yarn Up Outcomes, 2000) recommended

"That more training and funding be dedicated to exploring ways the new technology, such as the Internet and multimedia as well as audio and video, can be used by Aboriginal communities to record and maintain culture, history and heritage" (p.5).

The 'Our Story – Telling IT' project reference group has responded to this recommendation through the production of the 'Our Story – Telling IT' CD-ROM and website. These will assist teachers of Indigenous students to create and publish multimedia projects about their local Indigenous community on the World Wide Web.

## Educative

The lack of appropriate technologies and multimedia training for teachers of Indigenous students may worsen the social, economic, and geographic position of Indigenous peoples. 'Our Story – Telling IT' addresses this need by assisting teachers of Indigenous students, Indigenous community members, and Aboriginal Education Assistants to develop skills collaboratively and to use multimedia technologies.

The project will also:

- provide opportunities for students and teachers to obtain the International Computer Driving License,
- provide opportunities for high school students to use the development of the multimedia product as a workplace project in the Vocational Education Training Information Technology course,
- support the Human Society in Its Environment (HSIE) and Aboriginal Studies syllabuses as well as the Aboriginal perspective and the Aboriginal Education Policy.

Through information technology and multimedia the learners, teachers, and community involved in this project will be learning together, enhancing community

relationships, and re-affirming Indigenous cultures.

## Computers, multimedia and the learner

The project draws on emerging evidence of the power of multimedia to engage Indigenous students and enhance their learning outcomes.

Batten et al. (1998) cite and describe O'Donoghue's general impressions regarding success with computers as a teaching resource with Indigenous children. These included the views that computers:

- appeal to strengths in visual/spatial memory skills,
- provide a break from verbal instruction in 'high level' English (good for children with hearing loss),
- use tactile skills,
- allow for mistakes (privately),
- give instant results,
- are fun (p.49).

The use of computers with children from culturally different backgrounds can be a particularly innovative strategy. Batten et al. also described research that outlined how in one school, the principal developed a computer-publishing exercise devised for Indigenous children. This drew on expertise and support from the Indigenous community. Children interviewed community members and collected reminiscences, then recorded them on computer using local Indigenous words wherever possible. The 'reader' was illustrated by Indigenous artists and then published. Batten et al. wrote:

"The children gained skills in questioning, listening, transcribing, writing, editing and publishing. At the same time the school clearly flagged that it valued traditions and the language of the local Aboriginal community" (p.45).

Since the beginning of the use of computers in classrooms, researchers have noted the benefits. Batten et al. describe a computer program developed at Weibnoringle that includes activities...

"...such as children listening to parents talking about their heritage and then producing stories from these experiences on a word processor and publishing their stories. Computers were also used to keep 'word lists'. Students' reading and spelling improved along with a reported improvement in attitude and motivation" (p.46).

The project CD-ROM and website will enable students to design and create their own multimedia product. These products will be relevant educational resources and stimuli for the teachers and students of the school in subsequent years.

### **Links with the curriculum**

Student projects for any topic must be integrated with the school's core values, syllabus content, and student outcomes. Likewise, the 'Our Story – Telling IT' student projects are designed to be valued and recognised by the school as part of students' achievements and assessments. The project writing group has already developed some tools to assist schools and teachers in this process. Further resources and processes will be included on the CD-ROM. The process includes identification of:

- related mandatory subject in syllabuses;
- the outcomes that relate to subject matter in each syllabus;
- values, attitudes, and skills as indicators.

The evaluation of students' work should be collaborative and ongoing and include:

- the student's learning process and product;
- the student's skills, values, and attitudes.

The 'Our Story – Telling IT' CD-ROM will enable teachers to prepare a multistage program that includes these evaluation principles, including reflective learning and student-learning logs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Setting up the project**

The project builds on similar, successful projects (previous and current) wherever possible and appropriate – for example, the Yintarri and Weibnoringle projects described by Batten et al., and the Indigenous website projects at South Sydney High School, NSW in 2001 and at Nowra in 2000. This project goes further than other projects in that it culminates in a set of resources and electronic tools (i.e., the CD-ROM) that enable any Indigenous community in Australia to design and create a multimedia product that tells the story of their local Indigenous community.

The reference group was set up with representation of the key stake-holders. It has representation from the Aboriginal Education

Consultative Group, several directorates of the NSW Department of Education and Training, and local district Aboriginal Education Consultants.

### **Identifying the pilot schools**

Members of the reference group nominated the schools to be considered for the pilot stage of the project. These included secondary, primary, isolated, and metropolitan schools. The school principals were then approached and asked about the possibility of their Aboriginal Education Assistants, teachers, and students to become involved. District consultants and community liaison officers were consulted at the state and district levels. As the project progressed, it became obvious that communications and the relationship between the school and the local Indigenous community is paramount. This was anticipated at the outset but its importance was not fully realised at that point.

The teachers, computer coordinators, and AEAs from each school – and their district consultants – attended a two-day training course in order to network with each other and gain the skills needed to: build a project team in the school, teach students how to use the technology, and collaborate with their local Indigenous community.

### **Developing the products of the project**

The methodology to develop the products of the project follows a participant-developed solution. Materials for both the CD-ROM and the training program for the pilot-school teachers, computer coordinators, and AEAs were developed by the writing group which was nominated by the project reference group. Some of the materials were collated from existing departmental resources. Other resources and materials were created by the writing group. These were evaluated by the participants and modified as necessary.

### **Steps in the development of the project**

#### **A) Setting up the project.**

- Establish the reference group and the timeframe.
- Establish a list of participants and their roles by investigating current, similar projects; negotiating with principals, teachers, district personnel, and local

community members about their involvement and roles.

- Decision-making processes to define the task, determine the desired final product, and establish the materials that will be needed.
  - Assemble resources.
  - Ensure sufficient training for teachers, students, Aboriginal Education Assistants and community members in using the resources.
  - Collaboratively map the products to be created.
  - Determine a timeline that includes milestones.
- B) Identification of schools or colleges for the pilot phase of the project.
- These were drawn from a variety of contexts including urban, coastal, and inland Indigenous communities. It was intended that the pilot schools should reflect the diverse cultural and linguistic heritage in NSW.
  - Students, teachers, and Aboriginal Education Assistants in primary and secondary contexts represented.
  - Students at risk (and early school leavers) and students participating in school-to-work projects were involved.
- C) Enhance skills of students and teachers to facilitate the following.
- Management of interview schedules.
  - Interviews with community Elders.
  - Use of the selected technological tools.
  - Editing and assembly of the material.
  - Refinement of the multimedia product.
  - Promotion of the product.
  - Maintenance and updating of the product (important for an effective website).
- D) Evaluation.
- Posting the projects to the QTP website.
  - Evaluation of the pilot multimedia projects.
  - Evaluation of the test CD-ROM and website.
  - Evaluation of the project processes.

## Strategic outcomes

The 'Our Story – Telling IT' project has a number of outcomes that enhance opportunities for Indigenous students. People involved in the project will be able to:

- develop and maintain a digitised resource reflecting the local community's heritage;
- develop skills for potential employment in the multimedia or related industries that use new technologies – for example, retail and business services;
- become part of a skilled community able to use multimedia technology;
- share knowledge of the diversity of Indigenous (nations) culture with the broader Australian community and internationally.

## CONCLUSION

At the time of writing this paper, the first pilot stage is complete with the second pilot stage ready to start in 2002. The multimedia projects of five schools have been posted to the website. These can be accessed via the QTP website at [www.qtp.nsw.edu.au](http://www.qtp.nsw.edu.au). Evaluation is currently being conducted. The feedback so far has been very positive. More details on project progress, deliverables, and examples from the pilot schools will be included in the conference presentation.

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