

Training for life... in two worlds

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Abstract

For a number of years, Nungalinya College, based in Darwin, has provided accredited training for Yolŋu from Arnhem Land. One course called *Bilingual Family and Community Studies*, partly funded by Caritas Australia, has been developed over almost 10 years to assist Yolŋu, who speak English as another language make the transition into mainstream employment. Caritas' funding has enabled Nungalinya to employ a Yolŋu facilitator, enabling a bilingual approach to be taken. This paper is based on an evaluation of the program.

Apart from the bilingual aspect, an important feature of this program is that it unpacks western worldview values and assumptions before delivering the content of the training package, a Certificate I in Access to Employment and Further Study. This process identifies aspects of western culture while at the same time supporting English language, literacy and numeracy skills.

The Nungalinya program is designed to address these worldview concerns. The paper presents an overview of the course and the evaluation's findings. It suggests that the learnings from Nungalinya's experience are applicable to training delivered in remote Indigenous communities, where 'turbulent times' are represented in the form of various 'interventions', policy changes, and a range of local community challenges. The paper raises questions about the capacity of training providers to effectively respond to the needs of learners and suggests that funding for training programs for people from remote communities needs to take these issues into account.

Introduction

For a number of years, Nungalinya College, based in Darwin, has provided accredited training for Yolŋu from Arnhem Land. One course called *Bilingual Family and Community Studies* (BFACS)—partly funded by Caritas Australia, an aid and community development organisation—has been developed over almost 10 years to assist Yolŋu, who speak English as another language, make the transition into mainstream employment. This paper is based on an evaluation of BFACS, which was also funded by Caritas. Apart from the bilingual aspect, an important feature of this program is that it unpacks western worldview values and assumptions before delivering the content of the course, which includes nine units from the Certificate I in Access to Employment and Further Study. The paper sets out to report on the findings of the evaluation of the program, in terms of a) program outcomes; b) effectiveness of teaching and learning practices; and c) how well the program meets community needs. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Nungalinya College was founded in 1973, after discussions between the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society and the Methodist (now Uniting Church) Overseas

Mission. The Catholic Church entered the partnership in 1994. The College originally existed to educate Indigenous adults for ministry and service in remote Top End communities, and has since grown to cater for students from all over Australia. The College is a Registered Training Organisation with a training scope that includes Theology, Community Services and Work Preparation.

The BFACS program incorporates funding from Caritas for the position of a bilingual facilitator. By teaming non-Indigenous (Balanda) and Indigenous (Yolŋu) trainers and facilitators, worldviews of the two cultures can be discussed—‘both ways’ learning occurs. Discussion and negotiation occurs throughout the life cycle of the preparation and delivery of the course. During 2009, 50 students were enrolled in the BFACS program. These students came from the Arnhem Land communities of Galiwin’ku, Ramingining, Milingimbi, Gapuwiyak and Ski Beach. A total of 42 of those enrolled, completed the five week program.

Literature review

The turbulent context for training in remote Indigenous communities

While the changes that have occurred globally in recent times could be described as turbulent (with particular respect to the so-called global financial crisis or ‘GFC’), the changes confronting remote Indigenous people within Australia could rightly be described as ‘tumultuous’ (Calma 2008). In the Northern Territory, these have included changes to the operation of Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP), the Northern Territory Emergency Response and introduction of new shire structures. Further, while the purported intent of many of the interventions is to ‘close the gap’ of Indigenous disadvantage, there are indications that on several issues, the gap is widening, including in critical areas of education such as year 12 attainment (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009) and the achievement of international education benchmarks (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009).

Participation in VET among people from remote Indigenous communities

While it is generally acknowledged that participation in vocational education and training in remote communities is similar to participation in non-remote areas, there is clear evidence that while attainment levels appear to be comparable with non-remote participants, the completion rates are lower and the fields of study are quite different for remote training participants (Dockery 2009). Speaking specifically about the remote desert context, Young et al (2007) assert that there is

significant misalignment between the content and delivery models of VET and the prior skills, educational demands and aspirations of desert Indigenous peoples. VET programs struggle to adapt to and address the type of learning needs that arise at the interface of language and cultural difference... (p. 5).

While students participating in the Nungalinga College program do not come from desert communities, it would be fair to say that the issues for Top End communities are not dissimilar.

Both ways and bilingual learning

The idea of ‘two way’ or ‘both ways’ learning is not new in Indigenous education (Harris 1980). At the heart of the concept is a recognition of the equal worth of both

western and traditional Indigenous knowledge—‘A two-way exchange where the student recognises the knowledge of the teacher and the teacher is also expected to recognise the culture and background of the student’ (Harrison 2005). The practices associated with this understanding of cross-cultural learning have had traction in Yolŋu communities for some time now and are embodied in tangible ways in a number of contexts including the annual *Garma* festival (Fletcher 2008), Batchelor Institute’s philosophy of Indigenous learning (Ober and Bat 2007), commonly in the field of Natural and Cultural Resource Management (Smyth and Ward 2008) and more recently in relation to cultural healing practices (Wearne and Muller 2009).

They are well documented in the literature (see for example *Djama and VET*, Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council 1998). Commenting on a multi-project evaluation, Arnott et al (2009) suggest that

Recognising the importance of cultural knowledge and the benefits of a ‘both-ways’ approach helps avoid the debilitating effects on project success of adherence to the ‘lack perspective’ where project design views Indigenous people and their communities through a set of problems usually implying deficits which need to be overcome... Both ways practice stresses working together respectfully, cooperatively and flexibly, recognising strengths and differences and acknowledging the different and the particular histories and contexts of Indigenous communities. (p. 66)

While the meaning of ‘bilingual education’ is different from the principles embedded in ‘both ways’ learning, language is an important expression of culture. Language is a powerful vehicle in the exchange of knowledge and some would argue it is critical for effective communication and learning (Trudgen 2000). Respect for culture and language is reflected in the bilingual approach used by Nungalinga College.

Learning and identity

Identity can be thought simply as an expression of ‘who I am’. But what shapes this ‘self’ comes from within—psychologically—and from those around us—sociologically and anthropologically. Erikson in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (Erikson 1980) distinguishes between, ‘ego identity’, ‘personal identity’ and ‘group identity’. These three classifications roughly align with the psychological, sociological anthropological views. However, the outcomes and outputs of education and learning are seldom described as ‘successful’ in terms of identity formation. That is, the products of training programs are more likely to be described in terms of what a person can *do* with their new skills and knowledge, as opposed to what they can *become*. Traditionally, successful learning has been related to outcomes such as employment, skills competence, academic achievement, satisfaction with training, work performance and completions. While these things are of some importance they largely ignore the influence learning has on personal and social identity. Clemans et al. (2003) identify a number of adult and community education outcomes, many of which are directly related to identity formation. They place these outcomes under the heading of ‘learning to be: growth in well-being and self-awareness’.

When a person engages in learning he or she brings an identity to their learning and this is built into the process of learning (Schuller et al. 2004). Additionally a failure to attend to an individual’s identity may lead to short term competence but may not lead to sustained changes in practices required for the longer term (Guenther 2008).

In the context of Nungalinya's *Bilingual Family and Community Studies* program, it is apparent that participants who come into the program have a pre-existing identity, primarily as Yolŋu with worldviews that are consistent with their culture. Their engagement in the program is part of a process of *becoming*. While they will always be Yolŋu, they will inevitably emerge from the program with a capacity for new choices and a developing sense of belonging in both the 'Balanda' (non-Indigenous) world and their own cultural frame of reference.

Methodology

The questions posed in the evaluation plan, relevant to this paper are listed as follows:

1. How has the program responded to community need?
2. What are the definitive impacts/outcomes of the program?
3. What teaching and learning processes have been effective (or not)?
4. What are the broader implications that arise for teaching and learning practices in remote English as Another Language Indigenous contexts?

The methodology used for the evaluation was largely qualitative and relied to a large extent on the stories that Yolŋu participants offered. Stories offer a way of capturing the experiences of people in a way that reflects their world-views and points of reference (Silverman 2000). The meaning of these stories can then be interpreted (Ekman and Skott 2004) for audiences who have limited understanding of the context.

Yolŋu community members, who agreed to participate in the evaluation, came from several Arnhem Land communities including Ramingining, Ski Beach, Gapuwiyak and Milingimbi and were interviewed while they were at Nungalinya College in Darwin. A further set of interviews were conducted with past training participants in Galiwin'ku. Stories from trainees, were audio-recorded and translated into English after the interview. Stories were told in language with the assistance of a translator. They were transcribed with the assistance of a qualified translator. Descriptive written data from a selection of self-evaluation forms was also included for analysis. Approximately 20 current and past students participated in the evaluation, either in interviews or through their self-evaluation forms.

Transcriptions were placed in an NVivo (qualitative analysis software) project and analysed for common themes, according to inductive (theory building) and hermeneutic (interpretive and constructivist) qualitative analysis techniques (Clarke 1999; Thomas 2006) following the foci of the evaluation questions. An interview was also conducted with four (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) staff from Nungalinya College. A separate interview was conducted with two staff from Caritas Australia's Indigenous Program. Those interviews were conducted fully in English and took the form of a semi-structured interview. Data from these interviews was also transcribed. Analysis of this data was incorporated into the NVivo project described above.

Findings from the evaluation of the Bilingual Family and Community Studies (BFACS) program

In this section relevant findings from the evaluation are outlined, as they relate to the first three questions posed in the Methodology above. The findings presented show differences in perceptions among staff, the funding body Caritas, and students.

What are the community needs that the training aims to address?

Table 1 summarises how respondents saw the program responding to community needs. The table shows that students identified three priority needs: employment; understanding Balanda ways; and a desire to learn.

Table 1 Perceived needs that Nungalinya’s BFACS training program addresses (top three needs)

Ranking*	Students	Staff and funding body
1	Employment	Community development
2	Understanding Balanda ways	Understanding Balanda ways
3	Desire to learn	Filling in gaps

* Ranking is based on the number of words coded in NVivo according to each category

For many students, working and learning were inextricably linked. A comment from a discussion about why students wanted to come to the College is shown below.

My purpose of going was that I only went for work. [To] work, to learn. In terms of the second need, students reflected on the importance of understanding Balanda culture and worldview, particularly as it relates to the workplace. The comment below was made in the context of the discussion about why students wanted to come to learn in this program.

One of the important things we learnt [was] how Balanda law works with timelines.[It] was about money—how it is that Balanda keep money. That’s what they taught us Yolŋu so we can hold on to two laws—Balanda and Yolŋu Staff perceptions about this aspect of community need were consistent with these views. One illustration is given below:

We try and unpack time, money and work and in five weeks you can’t unpack it completely..., but the aim is to try and give them that foundation. Staff and funder respondents indicated that they were not sure if the program was responding to community need, and if it was, how. Their comments then are somewhat speculative in that they reflect anticipated community needs rather than known community needs. The funding body had a strong view that the program should contribute to community development.

The comments from staff and the funding body about filling gaps reflect a concern that publicly funded vocational training does not always allow time for learning about worldviews and language, and does not adequately address the learning needs of community members, particularly in terms of the ways Yolŋu learn.

How do stakeholders perceive training outcomes?

Table 2 summarises perceptions about outcomes from the *Bilingual Family and Community Studies* program. The table shows some difference in the order of importance of outcomes but there is some congruence in the observations of staff/funding body and students. Both groups highlighted confidence and work related outcomes as being significant.

Table 2 Perceived training outcomes of the BFACS program (top three outcomes)

Ranking*	Students	Staff and funding body
1	Confidence	Work related outcomes
2	Experience of a new environment	Confidence
3	Work related outcomes	Money management

* Ranking is based on the number of words coded in NVivo according to each category

The students' comments about confidence were fairly brief but it was evident that the program contributed to their identity in terms of their self concept and self efficacy. One student commented on her new-found capacity:

It may not be easy but I feel there's something I can take from this into a foreign place, even if there was no teacher to guide that process.

In terms of identity formation, the comments about experience of a new environment were important for awareness raising—being aware of different options and choices they had. In response to a question about outcomes, the translator summarised comments in one group as:

It has opened up their minds more.

Staff comments in relation to this question were consistent with students'.

In terms of the work related outcomes identified, these were not necessarily about obtaining employment, though at least one former student interviewed reported having a job. The outcomes identified were related to work placement experiences. They were described in terms of a) exposure to and understanding of workplace processes and practices; b) enjoyment of the experience; c) pre-employment skills; and d) entrepreneurial skills.

The money management skills identified by staff were primarily about increasing awareness and knowledge about money related tasks such as filling in time sheets for pay and understanding Balanda concepts of money.

What are the teaching and learning practices that contribute to the outcomes?

Table 3 summarises the findings for the third question, which attempts to assess teaching and learning practices that contribute to the outcomes described earlier. Among the top four factors, there were clear differences in the perceptions of staff/funders and students.

Table 3 Teaching and learning practices contributing to outcomes (top four factors)

Ranking*	Students	Staff and funding body
1	Work experience	Bilingual approach
2	Easy to understand	Teamwork
3	Supportive environment	Both ways learning
4	Activity based	Identity formation

* Ranking is based on the number of words coded in NVivo according to each category

Students commented most frequently on work placement experiences as being particularly memorable. Those who commented on work experience however, did not make many observations about why it was significant. One described it as 'very good

and fantastic’, while another described ‘feeling quite anxious, a bit ashamed and a bit scared’.

Comments from students suggested that the learning was made easy to understand by the teachers. For example, one student commented:

The two teachers who don’t speak our language very much talked mainly English to us and when they spoke, they were careful in the way they used English. They didn’t speak too fast. They didn’t use words which would go over our heads.

Coupled with this, were reflections on the support that was provided. For example,

Our teachers really helped us to feel engaged and confident and we knew why we had come and we found them extremely supportive, working with us.

Students felt that the learning was relevant, meaningful and well supported by trainers.

Perceptions of staff and funding body representatives were quite different. The main focus of their comments was on the bilingual/bicultural nature of the program. Others also commented on the efficacy of this approach in terms of helping explain unfamiliar Balanda concepts. The presence of both English and Yolŋu Matha speakers in the classroom was seen as critical to the success of the learning program.

The second factor contributing to outcomes, identified by staff, was teamwork. This is as much about the strength of the relationship between the Balanda and Yolŋu trainers as it is about working cooperatively together.

While staff did not explicitly describe a ‘both ways’ or ‘two way’ approach to their teaching and learning practices it was evident that within the team of Balanda and Yolŋu staff there was a level of knowledge exchange that spilled over quite naturally into course delivery. From many of the examples given during the interviews it was evident that there was mutual respect for Balanda and Yolŋu knowledge.

The last of the four top teaching and learning practice factors identified by staff/funders related to aspects of identity formation. While to some extent these were expressed as outcomes of the program (for example confidence, choice, wider worldview) there was a strong indication that staff were teaching to these identity elements, not just the requisite skills and knowledge included in the course.

Discussion and implications

The discussion now turns to the fourth question posed earlier: What are the broader implications that arise for teaching and learning practices in remote English as another language Indigenous contexts?

Mismatch of identified needs

The divergence in staff and student perceptions about community needs raises questions for program coordinators and Nungalinya College, more generally about what it is trying to achieve. The evidence from this evaluation supports a view that what their students want is training for Balanda jobs. It is evident also that trainees are keen to learn and in particular come to an understanding of Balanda culture particularly as it relates to the world of work. *The mismatch in perceptions points to the need for a more intentional consultation/community engagement process that*

captures expressed learning needs and matches them more directly with training delivery and content. Nungalingya College, as a primarily residential training college that draws in students from remote communities, faces the challenge of responding to the diversity of needs in communities, without delivering in those communities. While it is acknowledged that engagement can occur at a number of levels and does not always require physical engagement, there are inherent limitations of not having a presence within the context. That said there are of course advantages of being residential and its reputation as a respected learning institution suggests that Nungalingya College capitalises on these advantages. The challenge though, is for the College to get the balance right—matching content to need is not necessarily as easy as it might sound, especially in a diverse cross-cultural context.

The issue of mismatch may not be too different for other training providers offering courses in cross-cultural settings. It may be tempting to assume that a learning program meets learners' needs without the evidence to demonstrate that this is the case.

Bilingual and 'both ways' approach

Students did not highlight the presence of a language speaker in the classroom as an important contributor to the success of the program. It is likely that students take the bilingual nature of the program as a given and this provides a seamless learning environment where the focus can be on skills and knowledge rather than language. As indicated by the literature (see Both ways and bilingual learning, page 2) there is ample evidence to show the worth of a 'both ways' and bilingual approach in training provision. Given that this program intends to support learners to live in two worlds (Yolŋu and Balanda), the importance of offering a comfortable learning environment that supports the sharing of knowledge, foreign worldview concepts and cultural understanding should not be dismissed.

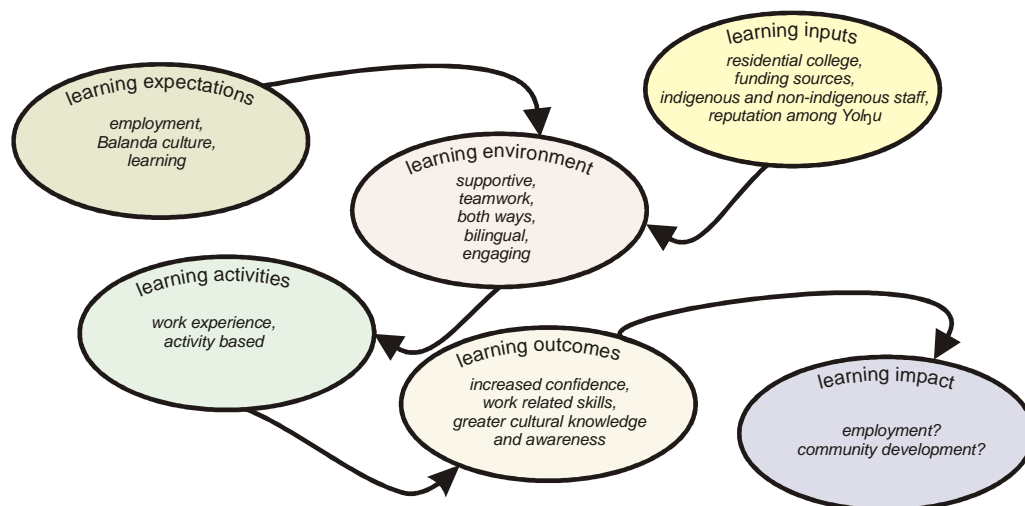
The difference in perceptions of staff/funders and students about effectiveness of teaching and learning practices may suggest that staff were focused on aspects of delivery while students were focused on aspects of experience. These elements of teaching and learning practice are complementary and should be seen as part of the natural sequence of learning (as shown in Figure 1 below).

While many training providers working in cross-cultural environments would agree, the financial constraints of publicly funded vocational training models make it very difficult to sustain an effective 'both ways' learning environment. However, given that participation in the Balanda/mainstream world is contingent on understanding and acting within a non-Indigenous frame of reference, *there is an imperative for training providers to offer 'both ways' learning environments.* The trick is to find ways of resourcing this—as Nungalingya College has done through Caritas.

Training for what?

Figure 1 shows the findings of the evaluation in a logic model sequence. There are elements of this model that should immediately resonate with Nungalingya College staff because it reflects the principles on which the BFACS program is based. The program has been built on a foundation of training practice principles that have been demonstrated to work over a number of years. The learning environment and learning activities have been well accepted and supported by students for some time. The evaluation of the program affirms those practice principles with supportive evidence.

Figure 1. Logic model for the Bilingual Family and Community Studies program



The literature (see *Learning and identity*, page 3) suggests that the key learning outcomes of the BFACS program, as identified by students, should come as no surprise. These outcomes, expressed primarily in terms of confidence and experience of new environments are foundational for students as they prepare to engage in a foreign world. The work related outcomes, should also come as no surprise, given the vocational nature of the training offered. The learning expectations of participants, identified in the evaluation, related to Balanda culture should also not come as a surprise. What may come as a surprise is the strong articulation of community need in terms of employment and relevant learning, which the staff and funder were reluctant to identify.

What the model does not show, and which would require a more thorough evaluation, is what the ultimate impact of the program is. Is there evidence to suggest that the program does meet participants' expectations of work in the Balanda world? Is it realistic to expect, as the funder does, that the program will lead to community development outcomes? These are questions for further research.

While the evaluation has definitively identified what the participants' expectations are, it has not determined how well those expectations are met. Training providers quite rightly see their role in terms of providing training. However, the extent to which the training meets needs and expectations—particularly in remote Indigenous contexts—is seldom known. Given the 'tumultuous' context of life in remote Indigenous communities—and the apparent failure of many initiatives over the years to produce benefits that remote communities expect—it would be valuable to know whether the assumptions on which the Nungalinya program are based, are valid. This would require a carefully designed study with a high level of community engagement.

Conclusions

This paper set out to report on the findings of an evaluation of the Nungalinya College *Bilingual Family and Community Studies* program. Participants and staff identified the program's immediate impacts in terms of identity (confidence and experience of new environments) and work-related outcomes. The different perceptions of staff and students as they relate to teaching and learning practices may suggest that learners are more attuned to the experiential aspects of their learning (such as work experience and

learning activities), while staff are more focused on process elements such as team work, bilingual, support and engagement. These perceptions are complementary and do not suggest a mismatch of perceptions. In terms of community need however, there was a mismatch of perceptions with students clearly identifying work and learning needs as priorities in addition to understanding Balanda ways. Staff and funders focused more on community development needs and filling in the gaps left by government funding constraints. Staff and funders also expressed a degree of uncertainty about what the community needs were.

There are a number of implications arising from the findings of this evaluation. *Firstly*, there is a need for Nungalinga College to initiate a more intentional consultation/community engagement process that captures expressed learning needs and matches them more directly with training delivery and content. Other training providers—particularly those delivering to remote Indigenous communities may well also benefit from adopting this kind of approach. *Secondly*, while acknowledging the additional costs associated with this kind of consultation and providing staff to work bilingually and biculturally, there is an imperative for training providers to offer ‘both ways’ learning environments for people from remote Indigenous communities. *Thirdly*, there is considerable scope for Nungalinga College (and other training providers delivering into remote communities) to conduct more rigorous evaluation of learning programs to assess the long term impact of effective training. The question that begs to be answered is: given the turbulence generated by ever shifting policies and response to Indigenous disadvantage, particularly in remote communities, to what extent does training make a difference?

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