'Coming Closer: Sharing Australian Aboriginal Stories through Drawing and Painting', an integrated arts teaching and learning case study.

Abstract

This paper presents an account of, 'Coming Closer: Sharing Australian Aboriginal Stories through Drawing and Painting', a project that has involved indigenous and non-indigenous children aged 4-5 years from the University of Melbourne's, Early Learning Centre, Abbotsford, Melbourne; Yappera Children's Centre Cooperative, Thornbury, Melbourne, and the Mareeba Aboriginal Outreach Program, Queensland, in an interactive learning experience centred on story and visual art.

The Coming Closer project has required indigenous storytellers, researchers and teachers, to work collaboratively with a common belief in the complementary power of story and art as a teaching and learning model. It highlights the valuable contribution that indigenous storytellers can make to the transmission and affirmation of cultural knowledge and it presents children's art-making as a significant vehicle for reflective thought and personal expression.

The project has been coordinated by early childhood arts educators from the University of Melbourne Jan Deans and Robert Brown and involved Aboriginal storytellers George Jillimablu and Boori Pryor.

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Introduction

Story or narrative is one of the most powerful tools human beings possesses for organizing their thoughts, feelings and events and interpreting human experience (Bruner, 1990). It has featured across all cultures since human language evolved (Phillips, 2000) serving as a significant vehicle for the transmission of human values and beliefs.

Storytelling involves three essential elements, the story, the teller and the listener. Stories can pass on beliefs and morals and when well told these can be enjoyable, inspire action and foster cultural appreciation. The impetus for creating stories may lie in the human predisposition to try to make sense of life and living and in the enjoyment and satisfaction gained when stories are shared with others; in fact words may even be described as the glue that binds society together.

Aboriginal Dreaming stories dominate the cultural life of the Australian Aboriginal people and are the subject of their graphic arts, the inspiration of their music and the core of their rich ceremonial life (Roberts and Mountford, 1969). Aboriginal storytellers are responsible for passing on knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices from one generation to another through stories and personal narratives that have cultural significance. Storytelling is used to establish a code of conduct that addresses moral issues that support the socialisation of children and the achievement of group goals (Butterworth and Candy, 1998). These stories often refer to an "inextricable connection between land, identity and culture" (D'Souza, 1999, p.28) and focus on themes including respect for elders, caring for the land and its animals, knowledge related to the spiritual world, the creation of the environment and rules for living (DETE, 1999).
In the Australian Aboriginal culture there is a strong oral tradition where children learn through, "observing, non verbal communication such as gestures, body postures, in-directness, and silences, as well as demonstration and imitation of adult activities" (Butterworth and Candy, 1998, p.22). Without any tradition of story as a written form of communication, storytellers have relied on the power of direct engagement with listeners through the use of facial expressions, gestures, images and sounds.

For all children storytelling contributes fundamentally to overall development and knowledge acquisition. It especially encourages the exploration of language and brings children and adults together in an intrinsically social experience. Children naturally make connections between story and visual art. Like storytelling, visual art has enabled communities to record and communicate their thoughts, feelings and beliefs (Darby, 1991). There is now developing support for the involvement of indigenous storytellers in early learning indigenous and non-indigenous settings (Weddell, 1995, Church and Hopson, 1989, Stevenson, 1996, Groome, 1994). Their contribution is valued for the knowledge they have of indigenous culture and for their willingness and ability to share this information with young children. Importantly they also provide a positive role model that affirms indigenous cultural identity.

**The Coming Closer Project**

The Coming Closer project was designed to document and analyse children's responses to Australian Aboriginal stories through language and art. Within the early childhood field there has been recent interest in the collection of children's drawings and personal stories as a form of data which provides information about the ideas, interests and development of children.
(Bond & Deans 1997, Deans and Brown, 2002) This interest is supported by the idea that the language and drawings of the young child provide a 'window of consciousness' through which insights can be gained into thoughts and feelings.

It is widely acknowledged that drawing offers young children an opportunity to not only symbolize their knowledge of lived experience (Rauch, 2001) but to also convey inner personal self in a powerful manner. The narratives of young children emerge very naturally in dramatic play (Gelda, 1984) and children learn at an early age to tell stories by participating in narrative practices that are modelled by adults and other children. Some theorists (Bruner, 1990) and Vygotsky, 1978) believe that narrative plays an important role in the socialization and in-culturization process and Gardner (1980, p 154) has referred to children's drawings as "interesting mixes of graphic and linguistic resources, in the service of complex conceptualization".

The following discussion presents an analysis of two stories. The River Story, by George Jillymablu was told to indigenous children aged 4-5 at the Aboriginal Yapper Children's Cooperative, Melbourne and to non-indigenous children at the University of Melbourne's Early Learning, Centre (ELC), Melbourne. The Wunjin Story by Boori Pryor was told to indigenous children aged 4-8 years who participated in the after-school hours Aboriginal Outreach Program, Mareeba, Northern Queensland.

Immediately following the telling of these stories the children were invited to 'draw or paint something they had remembered from the story' and then describe in their own words the content of their artworks. The art-making was made special by teachers who presented inviting and practical learning environments in which time, space, materials and interactions were given due consideration. Adequate time was allocated to enable the children to reflect on the content of the stories and to explore the aesthetic possibilities of simple and
controllable materials, including black pencil, felt pen and tempera painting on sturdy cardboard bases. Open-ended questioning by the teachers was used to help the children to confirm their understandings of the stories told, create new personal stories and communicate these through individual images.

**The Storytelling Approach**

Dressed in everyday clothes and adopting a relaxed storytelling style both George and Boori created a reassuring atmosphere by linking their lives to the lives of the children. From the outset both storytellers established themselves as elders and role models, and emphasised a code of conduct including respectful listening and cooperation within the group. Both storytellers were passionate about their stories and committed to sharing these with others. They used direct and informal language and their use of colloquial phrases gave character and life to the stories told.

George's personal narrative 'The River Story' (Appendix 1), tells of his experience as a boy growing up close to a rainforest in Northern Queensland and of a near-drowning experience in a flooded river. Boori's Aboriginal Dreaming story (Appendix 2) tells of the creation of the Wunjin Spirit. Both stories set in 'outback' contexts stressed the importance of listening to the elders and contained morals related to safety and danger. Whilst George's story did not note any Dreaming characters or spirits, his reference to 'The River' suggested that it had its own 'spirit' and had the power to "tell us a lot of stories".

Boori, a successful local sports-person and author was well known to the Mareeba children and had a hero-like status in the local community. He consequently had no trouble gathering the children around him and set the scene by locating himself in a large armchair. His commanding physical
presence, penetrating eyes and dramatic facial expressions engaged the children through words only. George had a contrasting storytelling style that integrated softly spoken rhythmic language interspersed with purposeful moments of silence supported by the evocative sounds of the didgeridoo. He also used map-like drawings that located special places talked about in the story and he acted out dramatic events such as clinging to a submerged log and wading through a flooded river. Both storytellers demonstrated different skills and styles but shared an equal devotion to the art of storytelling and to the significance of their stories for young children. They created an atmosphere of mutual respect and provided a safe haven for the exploration and expression of personal thoughts and feelings.

The Children's Responses

Across the three settings the responses of sixty children were documented through the collection of artworks, verbatim child comments, video recording and photographs. The children came with varying degrees of experience and maturity and so the following analysis does not attempt, “to classify, compare groups, explain, predict or make judgements” (Hawke, 1993, p. 10). Rather it aims to identify the key qualities and themes that are suggested by the children's responses as, “essences of shared experience” (Patton, 1990, p.7).

The story telling and art-making event provided many opportunities for listening, oral exchange, active exploration, and times for unhurried reflection (DETE, 1999); an approach that supported the learning styles of the young children involved. All children demonstrated an ability to listen for lengthy periods and enthusiastically made the transfer from story to art, displaying a joyful interest in recording their memories of the stories. Individual responses made reference to both the content of the stories including respect for the elders,
nature (animals and the land), spiritual beliefs and other general themes such as security and social history.

The non-indigenous children at the ELC displayed a high level of comprehension to the detail of The River Story, for example Rachael (5 years, ELC, Illustration 1) included a range of representational symbols that directly explain what George played, drew and talked about during the story telling session. She stated; "There is the didgeridoo. There is the river and in the river is the tree. George is hanging onto the tree. This is the Kangaroo. It's looking to the side so you can see it and the bones. Next to the river is the dots and lines". Another child Ben (4 years, ELC, Illustration 2) gave emphasis to the drama inherent in the story by depicting an energetic pattern of wave-like lines that suggests the dangerous flow of the flooded river. One solitary line slants up-wards through the waves topped by a small red shape that Ben describes as, "George holding onto the tree in the water". Harriet (5 years, ELC) embellished the original story by emphasising the important role the cousins played in saving George from the flooded river. She stated, “That’s George. It’s raining so they are in the tent. George's cousins are there too”.

In contrast to this the indigenous children from Yapperra did not focus on literal interpretations on The River Story, but instead explored broader themes such as the painful social history of the Australian Aboriginal people and cultural identity. Jaidon (4 years, Yapperra, Illustration 3) stated, "These are all the babies around here. She is looking for her babies and she can't find them. All these striped people are taking her babies". Another child's statement also links with this theme of the 'stolen generation'. Jillibalu (4 years, Yapperra) states, "They are the rocks. He's taking the baby off the kangaroo. He wants to make lots of money". It may have been that the ‘safe place’ created by the storytelling and art experience gave license to these children to explore such sensitive themes. This experience also seemed to facilitate reflection on cultural identity as is evident in Rene's (4 years, Yapperra,
Illustration 4) painting that includes the Aboriginal flag and is proudly titled, “The Koorie live here”.

The indigenous children from Mareeba all made reference to the Wunjin Spirit and their works suggest a seamless connection between nature and the spiritual world, "where humans are not considered separately from the environment" (D'Souza, 1999, p.28). Interestingly whilst 'The River Story' does not implicitly mention the spirit world, one indigenous child Dion (5 years, Yapper, Illustration 5) made his own connection; he stated, "The Mama was walking around. The Mama was doing some work; she was chasing the Gods and the people. And that's the whole river".

In most cases the indigenous children from the Aboriginal Outreach Program in Mareeba demonstrated an understanding of the underlying moral messages inherent in 'The Wunjin Story'. Celestine (8 years, Mareeba) stated, "Wunjin has his legs taken off by bad spirits. He stuck his spear in the ground. His mother was crying". Lucille (8 years, Mareeba notes that , "The Wunjin, he didn't listen to his parents. The sun went down and his leg come off". Another child Karline (8 years, Mareeba, Illustration 6) focuses on "A little boy who always runs away" and at the same time communicates the all- encompassing spirit of nature and the place of people within it. Her mystical work portrays an expansive night sky where large blue stars predominate and people are represented as small and insignificant.

Both stories told to the children made a close link between people and their environment which is a common theme in Dreaming stories (DETE, 1999). An analysis of responses across all settings demonstrated that children readily made connections with nature as is evident in the work of Toni (4 years, Yapper, Illustration 7) who described her work as "This is the river". This artwork communicates a strong feeling for and connection to the land through the use of horizontal bands of colour - black, yellow, ochre and rust red which stretch
across the top of the page suggesting a distant sunset. Below this a large rectangle bordered by a white line gives the impression of wide-open spaces.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of children's responses to Australian Aboriginal stories indicates that reflective and expressive thinking can be promoted through an integrated arts program involving story, story-tellers, listening, language and art making. The themes and morals stressed by the storytellers were the keystone of the Coming Closer project. The captivating way in which these stories were told stimulated and engaged both indigenous and non-indigenous children alike. The children's detailed responses to these stories demonstrated that they were able to remember the content and also comprehend the underlying morals of each story. The indigenous children's responses both from Yapperama and Mareeba, showed an awareness of deeper themes relevant to the Aboriginal people including connections with the spiritual world, the 'stolen generation' and cultural identity. The power of nature seemed to be a significant theme within the indigenous stories as children in all settings created works that expressed their connection and affinity to the natural world.

The integrated teaching and learning approach adopted within the Coming Closer project facilitated both the receptive and expressive learning abilities of the children involved. The stories and children's artworks generated throughout the project have been developed into a touring exhibition which has been presented in a number of national and international venues. This exhibition has enabled participants including children, teachers and families to review the experience and thus deepen their appreciation of what has been achieved. It has also initiated public celebrations and seminars that have encouraged information sharing between indigenous and non-indigenous people in an atmosphere of mutual respect.
The University of Melbourne’s Early Learning Centre has also created a virtual Coming Closer gallery that makes the exhibition available to students, researchers and others with an interest in children’s art. For further information see www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/ELC/boor

References


Appendix 1: The River Story by George Jillimablu

This story was told to both non-indigenous children at the Early Learning Centre, and to indigenous children at the Yappera Children's Services Cooperative, Melbourne, Australia.

When George was a boy he lived in Northern Queensland close to a rainforest, where children swam in a river, picked fruit and caught fish.

That was the place where I grew up and I learned a lot of things when I was small. We went down to the river and we stayed late at night fishing. Back up at my place in Kuranda we get lots of rain. When the rain falls down, it rains and rains and never stops. It floods.

One day my cousin and I went down to the river when it was flooded. He swam across and made it to the other side. It was my turn; I called out, "This is the way I go!" And I dived in, but the water was too strong. I was very frightened and afraid. I could see a tree and I grabbed hold of it with my dear life. There was rain coming down. As I was holding onto that little tree I clung to it and never let go.

I went under the water - I went down and up again - down and up again. The water was in my face. At times I thought I was going to drown, but I kept on singing out and singing out.

My cousin heard my call and sang out to my Grandfather who was down the river fishing. When he heard the shouting he came running up. He stepped across from one rock to another - sometimes he fell and he got up - pushing his back against the water - he went across, and further across, and he grabbed my hand and put me on his shoulders. And that was a story I'll never forget, and it was very scary. I learnt my lessons there. This river can tell us a lot of stories.
Appendix 2: The Wunjin Story by Boori Pryor

This story told to a group of mixed aged children (3-10 years) at the Mareeba Aboriginal Outreach Program, Mareeba, Northern Queensland, Australia.

"You know what? You children, you never get what you want. You might say I want this - I want that - but the old people won't give you nothing until it's right for you to have it"

When the adults used to go out hunting all the kids had to stay home near the fire with the old people and the sick. The hunters would get up with the sun and only hunt during the day. You can't go out at night-time, because you might see the bad spirit and get sick and die. When the men left the camp the others would say, “See you brother, show us what you got when you come back”. After hunting they would make the fire before the sun went down, have a feed and tell their stories.

One fella, Wunjin, kept always thinking about what he wanted to do all the time. This boy, he always wanted everything all of the time. Wunjin was wondering if they were telling him the truth about their hunting during the day. He thought, “Tomorrow I’m going to sneak up after them and see where they go”.

So next morning he took off after them, but those fellows were walking very fast. When he caught up to them he was far away from the camp and he was scared. He ran back to the camp. Even though he knew he shouldn’t he went out again, but not so far. He now thought, “I know how to catch and I know how to make a fire, I’m going to cook something up”. He had a big feast and came back quickly before the others and nightfall.

The others came back with a big feed of kangaroo, but he wasn't hungry. They asked him, “Hey would you like something to eat”, but his belly was full. They found out that he had been leaving the camp and they got real angry and so they told everyone not to play with him or to give him anything to eat for three days.

Wunjin became very lonely and hungry. “No body is here”, he thought, so again he didn’t listen and went out hunting. This time he went out a long way, had a big feed, a swim, and fell asleep. When he woke up it was very late and the sun was nearly set. “Oh no”, he said and he went rushing back to camp, but everything went black. The next minute he started to feel that something was wrong. “I don’t feel as if I can run no more”. He stopped and looked down. His right foot was gone! That bad spirit, Quinkin, had done it. He looked down again and he had no leg up to his knee and then no leg at all! He was stranded in the bush. He began to call out, “Woo, wooo, wooo.....”.

His mother heard him. “That’s Wunjin, that’s my boy... He’s coming home”. She was waiting there and holding onto her breath for him to come - but he never came! And she could hear his call as it became softer and softer. A big mob of tears started to come out because she knew she’d never see him again.

And you know what? My Nanna used to tell me that story to make sure I’d stay by the fire so the Quinkin wouldn’t come and get me. And sometimes you can see Wunjin standing on one leg with his spear or see one big foot print. His job now, is to come and frighten you to stay near the fire.