Working and Learning with First Peoples of Australia in the Creative Arts

A framework to support respectful and mutually beneficial service learning partnerships in the creative arts
What is service learning?
Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, develop intercultural awareness and strengthen communities. Service learning steps outside of the traditional classroom to enable students to engage with real versus imagined subjects and, thus, to learn about culture through their own lived experience. The core concept is the combination of service and learning objectives, with activities designed to positively affect all participants. Service learning programs are often distinguished from other forms of experiential education by their intention to equally benefit students and communities, and by their focus on both the community-led activities and the learning that is occurring. For many, service learning is also defined by shared control over programs between educators and community participants; by the mutual learning between students and community participants and not just the exchange of service; by the pursuit of concrete outcomes for participating communities; and by student contributions to broader civil society.

What is arts-based service learning?
Arts-based service learning is a way of connecting students and community members and promoting community arts practice. This places art in a community context as both a creative practice and a teaching method, and addresses arts-based educational objectives ranging from creative self-expression to competency with discipline-specific standards. Arts-based service learning is distinguished from general service learning by the fact that the arts are central to the experience as both a means to meeting community-identified needs and an end in and of themselves. Arts-based service learning has been reported to assist with: facilitating expression, communication and connections between diverse participants; evoking participants’ strengths and abilities; developing empathy and compassion between participants and for other groups; building community through empathetic social interaction; providing opportunities to inquire into and affirm personal, cultural, or spiritual values; and providing the ability to “mirror” society in the form of artworks and subsequently invoke social change. Our research has shown these benefits are highly compatible with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives of service learning.

How can arts-based service learning be of use to educators and communities?
Our work seeks to show how arts-based service learning can be used as a strategy through which higher education institutions and communities can promote First Peoples’ cultural content for all students. It provides a relationship-based approach that has the potential to assist educators in overcoming the challenging political, social and practical task of incorporating First Peoples’ perspectives into higher education curricula, and at the same time directly support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through this process. Our research has shown that arts-based service learning can provide a culturally sensitive, community-led and enabling process for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. We make this claim on the basis that the arts have the capacity to foster deeply interpersonal and intercultural expression and communication.
About the Arts-Based Service Learning with First Peoples Project

This is one of the first in-depth studies to look into arts-based service learning programs with First Peoples of Australia. The project was led by Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in collaboration with Curtin University, The University of Western Sydney, and community partners in Central Australia and Western Australia.

At the heart of this project has been the desire to enhance the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural content is embedded in higher education arts curricula. Building on three years of pilot work in Central Australia, this project involved running arts-based service learning (ABSL) programs with three Australian universities (Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, Curtin University and the University of Western Sydney). These programs were undertaken in collaboration with communities in regional and metropolitan areas in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and largely involved students working alongside Aboriginal artists and Elders on community-led projects, such as song recording projects, developing school programs, television series and journalism projects.

This work has revealed an extremely rich and multilayered picture of the intercultural processes and outcomes associated with each of the programs. It has highlighted the complexities and realities of Australia’s socio-political history and the ongoing impact of colonisation on First Peoples and communities. It has also shown how a relationship-focused, strengths-based approach, underpinned by community leadership and critical reflection, can lead to transformational learning experiences for all involved. Such insights have come from all participants in the programs including Aboriginal artists, Elders and arts workers, partner representatives including school teachers and administrators, community arts organisation representatives, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students, and ABSL facilitators from the partner universities.

This research has identified that three interconnected ways of learning were occurring in this work. These have been framed around Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing. In fleshing out how these three ways of learning can occur in ABSL, we have found great inspiration in Aboriginal scholar Karen Booran Mirraboopa Martin’s (2003) descriptions of a Quandamooka worldview that encapsulates these three elements. These form the basis of the framework featured in this publication.

While the complex and interrelated ways in which this learning and engaging occurred were certainly not as neat and organised as this framework suggests, this framework resonates with our practice, and has provided a way of organising and representing a substantial amount of rich data that has arisen from our research in a way that takes inspiration from an Aboriginal worldview. It is hoped this will be a useful starting point for those interested in developing new programs; a valuable reflective prompt for those in the thick of these programs; and a beneficial reference point for those evaluating these programs.

### A framework for Arts-Based Service Learning (ABSL) with First Peoples

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<th>Ways of engaging</th>
<th>Key insights derived from the project</th>
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<td><strong>Knowing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sitting down on country</strong></td>
<td>Whether the ABSL program involves travelling to a remote, far away country or rediscovering the country that one regularly lives on, a very necessary step is to slow down, observe and connect with the country and its people. This will most likely ensure a much deeper engagement for all concerned.</td>
<td>• Follow cultural protocols and <strong>sit down with Elders</strong> before commencing an ABSL program. This is an appropriate way to connect with country and people. • Ask an Elder whether they would be prepared to take the students on a <strong>site visit</strong>, to learn about places of significance and bush tucker, for example. • Take students on a <strong>sensory walk</strong> at the beginning of the ABSL.</td>
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<td><strong>Respecting culture &amp; First Peoples’ worldviews</strong></td>
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<td>When value is placed on respecting and learning about Aboriginal culture and worldviews from Elders and the artists themselves, we begin to take a vital step towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content in a way that privileges the holders of that content.</td>
<td>• Organise <strong>cultural awareness classes</strong> as part of your ABSL program orientation to prioritise the learning of First Peoples’ culture and worldviews. • Arrange for <strong>culture and language lessons</strong> during the ABSL program so that students can seek advice about cultural protocols from Elders as they come to hand. • Provide students with <strong>readings</strong> and resources to engage with cultural protocols and the socio-political history of Australia.</td>
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<td><strong>Transforming understandings &amp; worldviews through critical reflection</strong></td>
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<td>When critical reflection accompanies the embodied and emplaced learning experiences in ABSL programs, participants have the potential to experience deep and long-lasting lessons that radically transform their understandings of themselves, their arts-practice, and the world around them.</td>
<td>• Use <strong>guided reflection tools</strong> such as reflective diaries with prompts and questions about the experience. • Incorporate regular <strong>informal de-briefs</strong> for the group to off-load and speak frankly about their thoughts and experiences. • Undertake <strong>semi-structured interviews</strong> with students to prompt reflection and discussion on a one-to-one basis.</td>
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<td><strong>Being</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building deepening relationships</strong></td>
<td>Taking the time to develop trusting relationships with people and partners is the most fundamentally important part of this work. These relationships underpin everything that is learned and experienced on these ABSL programs, and without them any kind of meaningful engagement is not possible.</td>
<td>• <strong>Prioritise building trusting relationships</strong> with participants instead of focusing on your own agenda and the tasks at hand. • Arrange for <strong>community consultations</strong> to occur, where you discuss process, aims, and ways of working, long before a student group is introduced to the community. • Realise that relationships <strong>take time</strong> to build, and this may take a number of years. Be patient!</td>
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<td><strong>Learning &amp; sharing in reciprocal ways</strong></td>
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<td>Embracing an asset-based approach to ABSL programs allows us to become attuned to the reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways in which participants learn from one another in these contexts. When viewed this way all participants are active learners with something valuable to share.</td>
<td>• <strong>Give participants time to jam and collaborate</strong> with one another. This quite often will organically lead to sharing, reciprocity and mutual learning. • Reflect on the ABSL program using an <strong>asset-based approach</strong>, where you view all participants as active learners with something to contribute.</td>
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<td><strong>Responding to contextual politics &amp; dynamics with sensitivity</strong></td>
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<td>These ABSL programs are often set amidst deeply complex contexts with politics and dynamics that are difficult to grapple with, to say the least. While this might result in a degree of apprehension from all participants, this can be mitigated to a degree with sensitivity, humanity and a good dose of humour.</td>
<td>• Have regular <strong>de-briefs</strong> with program teams, or Advisory Groups, to discuss appropriate and sensitive responses to topics as they come to hand.</td>
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| Doing            | Using the arts as a medium for connection & collaboration | In service learning with First Peoples, arts-based processes commonly provide culturally appropriate ways of expression, communication and connection with one another, and provide an opportunity to creatively share life experiences and appreciate one another’s strengths. | • Look out for ways to **respond to community needs with a creative solution** that everyone can work on collaboratively.  
• **Draw on local creative people** (musicians, artists, community radio personnel, for example) to be part of your work so that the ABL program becomes part of the community and continues even if you are not there. |
| Designing & implementing ABL programs to meet both community & institutional needs | When designing ABL programs with First Peoples, a delicate balance needs to be achieved between meeting the community needs and meeting the institution’s requirements in terms of resourcing, recruitment, assessment, curriculum design, and policy compliance. A sense of shared ownership is vital for ongoing, mutual engagement. | • **Keep the channels of communication open** with community leaders to ensure that community ownership of the program occurs, and the community guide the processes you’re following.  
• **Report up** to institutional management to ensure that the program meets the requirements of the university, but also shares its innovative approaches to learning and teaching with others.  
• Build in **peer support** for facilitators and participants of these programs to ensure necessary support is given. |
| Building sustainability into ABL programs | Building sustainability into ABL programs with First Peoples involves making a commitment to developing ongoing relationships, developing community assets and strengths, and supporting participant morale amid frequently challenging circumstances. | • When designing these programs, factor in the significant hard and soft infrastructure that is needed, and realise that **starting small** is often a wise move.  
• **Be in it for the long haul** and be prepared to put in a significant investment of time and energy. Be prepared to have your life and worldview changed, possibly for the better. |
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Photo Credits: Desert Harmony Festival performance 2013; Karlu Karlu; Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University students and staff with Winanjikari Music Centre musicians; Brian Morton; Curtin University students and staff; UWS students and Mungkarta school students; Desert Harmony Festival performance 2012.

Featured Artwork: Napa Dreaming by Louise Rankine (Mungkarta, NT). Our thanks go to Louise for her permission to use this artwork, and Barkly Regional Arts for facilitating this process.


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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we worked for this project, and pay our respect to Elders, past and present.