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Sharing Place, Learning Together

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Supporting sustainable educational partnerships to advance social equity

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Cover photo: At sunset, a young boy plays with a ball in Maningrida while others watch. Photo by Emily Hanna on Flickr, 2008.

Designed by Gary Dickson.

First published June 2014.
Republished June 2016.

An electronic version of this document can be obtained from:
socialequity.unimelb.edu.au

For citation: Godinho S., Webb J., Woolley M. and Winkel K.
(2014) *Sharing Place, Learning Together: supporting sustainable partnerships to advance social equity*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne

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Introduction

Sharing Place, Learning Together: Supporting sustainable educational partnerships to advance social equity is a project funded by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI). It addresses sociocultural barriers to equity of participation and outcomes in school and tertiary studies through sharing knowledge and working with Indigenous communities and educators. The project's aims are threefold:

- to document insights into working with communities and educators;
- to promote and raise Aboriginal students' aspirations for engagement in further education; and
- to enrich the taught curriculum at both Maningrida College and the Science and Education Faculties at the University of Melbourne (UoM) so that they reflect more appropriately Indigenous perspectives and pedagogy.

The MSEI project embodies the Sharing Place Learning Together (SPLT) partnership, which has evolved since 2010 with funding from an anonymous donation to the Australian Venom Research Unit (AVRU) for the support of Indigenous health and education endeavours. This partnership comprises the Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics, the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) and Maningrida College, a remote community school situated in Northern Arnhem Land.

Through the SPLT partnership, UoM has supported Maningrida College's Learning on Country (LoC) program, and its recent extension, Learning on City discussed later in this report. Both programs are premised on learning being two ways — a meeting of Indigenous and Western knowledge and communicative capacities. LoC is an integrated fieldwork program involving students working alongside Traditional Owners (TOs) and the local Djelk Rangers. It seeks to increase student attendance by engaging with place-based pedagogies where curriculum content, learning and teaching are structured around what is most meaningful to the students — their places, their culture, their experiences (Gruenewald, 2003; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Osborn & Guenther, 2013). The LoC program seeks to:

- deepen both Indigenous and non-Indigenous student understanding of Australia's biodiversity and natural resource management;
- extend education pathways; and
- provide an introduction to local employment opportunities.

The funding from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI) enabled the interdisciplinary SPLT team to undertake a small research study that investigated the SPLT partnership capacity building and the opportunities it has created to merge Indigenous and Western knowledge and practices. MSEI, established in mid-2012, supports interdisciplinary research on social equity issues across the full spectrum of social life including health, law, education, housing, work and transport. The institute facilitates researchers working with government and community organizations and helps with the dissemination and translation of research for public benefit (MSEI, n.d.). MSEI's funding also covered a participatory workshop conducted by Maningrida College staff and students at UoM. This report specifically addresses these MSEI project deliverables and also highlights the project's outreach achievements, collaborations and connections.

The research study deliverable

A qualitative study was undertaken in 2013 to gain insights into partnership capacity building, and the role the SPLT partnership has played in supporting Indigenous education and identifying mutual benefits and outcomes. The following questions guided the study:

- What are the key factors and enabling conditions that support sustainable partnerships?
- How have the knowledge exchanges between the UoM team and the Indigenous community raised Indigenous voice and aspirations?

Interviews were conducted on site with 14 participants, including Traditional Owners (TOs), members of the College leadership team, teachers, and a UoM Master of Teaching graduate who

was employed by the school. In particular, the interviews sought to monitor the processes of capacity building of Indigenous community members, identifying opportunities to merge Indigenous and Western knowledge and practices. What follows are snapshots of the findings — the detail being available in published papers (Webb, Godinho, Woolley & Winkel, 2013; Godinho, Woolley, Webb & Winkel, in press).

The enabling and constraining factors that impact a sustainable partnership

The majority of the interviewees claimed they were initially highly sceptical about the likelihood of any value-adding to the College by the UoM team's visit based on their past experiences. As one interviewee lamented:

Maningrida is so heavily hit by government visitors and researchers, any people that think they want an Aboriginal experience. They choose Maningrida because it is on a quick flight from Darwin. [W]e get over loaded big time with researchers, medical people, other people from other places who just think they can come here and fix the problems experienced and go away and write some fantastic paper about the wonders of the world in Maningrida. But at the end of the day leaving us to do the actual groundwork of what it is really about.

Interviewees agreed it was the regular visits to Maningrida College by the team and the continuity of team members that assisted in diminishing this scepticism. One interviewee stated, 'Indigenous education is about time in the community and building relationships.' Another identified 'the work that happens when you do come here and also the results from the work that you have helped facilitate' as an enabling factor which assisted in raising the team's credibility. Resource development, in particular the pocket book series co-authored with students and teachers, was singled out by the participants as 'a real winner'. The collaborative process aligned with school requests to support their literacy programs and was integral to the UoM team's intention to focus on relationship-building during the early visits. This book production process is now published for sharing with other educators (Godinho, Woolley, Webb & Winkel, 2014).

Other factors that the interviewees considered supportive of the partnership formation and that connected with the team's relationship-building focus were:

- telephone conferences between visits to keep the UoM team informed of College and Community developments and be more aware of local complexities and constraints;
- curriculum resources provided by UoM, including access to documents and information that supported their classroom programs and integrated units of work that drew on the rangers' expertise; and
- the informal opportunities for professional development and teaching support afforded to staff during visits.

Factors that constrained the partnership capacity building were also identified by interviewees. Most notable was the lack of clarity about the aims and purpose of the SPLT project and the different roles of team members. As one interviewee attested, 'It took me a while to get my head around what your goals were and how they fitted with what our goals were.' Interviewees also raised the issue of an insider-outsider mindset among staff who were not targeted to work with the SPLT team. Several interviewees commented that these College staff felt the UoM team was being privileged at their expense.

They could see that people were getting spoilt coming to Maningrida, getting them out in troupies, getting them organized to do trips, using up school resources. They were seeing us wrapping around these visitors – all this support when they don't get it. I have been here for three years and I've never been to Kolorbidahdah (campsite). But people come up for two weeks and they go to Kolorbidahdah. So you feel like you are doing the hard yards but you are not getting the rich experience the visitors are getting, you know.

Such comments served as a reminder of the need to consider the impact of a large team arriving in a remote community and the importance of communicating to all staff the project's goals, team members' roles, and the explicit purpose of the visit. One interviewee suggested running a 'Q & A' session for interested staff; another suggested circulating a 'one pager' of key information prior to each visit, including how the teaching staff fitted within the scope of the project's activities.

Raising Indigenous voice and aspirations

The interviewees identified the pocket book production knowledge exchange as a key source of raising Indigenous voice. Students drew on their knowledge of country to inform and shape the books' content, an Indigenous Assistant Teacher played a key editorial role, and TOs and community elders were approached to check the content and give permission for publication. The UoM team scaffolded the writing process, prepared the pocket book templates and printed the first drafts. The publication of a student's artwork in a 'history of venom' exhibition at UoM Melbourne and published in the accompanying catalogue (Healy & Winkel, 2013), was also perceived as raising Indigenous voice and described as giving both her and her mother 'a sense of pride that was huge.'

It was the LoC 'on country' day trips and camps where TOs and elders, as knowledge holders, were able to share their cultural heritage and their connectedness to, and responsibility for the management of country that were seen by the interviewees as pivotal to raising Indigenous voice. These 'on country' experiences were flagged as giving valuable insights into how the taught curriculum at both Maningrida College and the Science and Education Faculties at the University of Melbourne might reflect more appropriately Indigenous perspectives and pedagogy.

The inaugural Learning on City visit by a group of 11 students and 4 staff from Maningrida College in November, 2012 was collaboratively planned by the College and UoM team was perceived as another critical event that impacted students' aspirations. The visit was described by an interviewee as students having 'opportunities in a safe environment, being facilitated by people who we trust, who can help grow their learning and grow their understanding of the world.' The program included: an introduction to the AVRU laboratory; meeting and talking with key people at Murrup Barak about university life; science fieldwork at Cumberland River with Museum Victoria staff, followed up by viewing specimens collected at the Museum laboratories; and a 'behind the scenes' tour with the director of the reptile house at the Melbourne Zoo.

Several interviewees referred to the impact of the visit beyond the students who attended, referring to the interest and curiosity that

the videos of the visit raised when shown in the school assembly on return to the College, noting:

To see a world that has got all the things in it that you talk about with Science and Maths and people actually engaged in research — people's whose whole lives are about venom, animals and museums. They haven't had seen that before. So, when they come back and they showed it [video] at the assembly, kids were going 'What's that?' It's a big science lab and the kids had something in their hands, you know it was fantastic These kids were watching the kids down in Melbourne do things.

Several interviewees, however, acknowledged that for some students the experience was a little overwhelming, and that communication was not always pitched appropriately to second language students. It was also suggested that with advance planning, explicit teaching and assessment tasks could be built into the Learning on City program. This feedback was timely with for planning the 2013 program and subsequently fed into the development of the MSEI participatory workshop at UoM for which students prepared an art exhibition that contributed to their school-based assessment.

Melbourne visit and participatory workshop

The participatory workshop was co-hosted by MSEI and the SPLT team on the 21st November, 2013. It involved presentations from key research participants with the aim to increase engagement with Indigenous cultures and community across UoM, and to provide new opportunities for cross-cultural knowledge exchanges. It did this by bringing together diverse groups to disseminate information, provide feedback, and offer input into the project's processes of capacity building.

During the workshop, a group of participants from Maningrida College presented on their educational programs and perspectives on the University partnership. The visitors comprised 10 students involved in the school's Learning on Country (LoC) and arts programs, with accompanying staff and elders. The students curated their own exhibition of artworks and cultural materials that had been selected in Maningrida and brought to Melbourne for

this purpose. Staff representatives presented on these programs: Elder and Teacher Assistant Joseph Diddo, Assistant Teacher and trainee educator Heleana Gulwa, teachers Mason Scholes, Jaya Regan and LoC co-ordinator Shane Bailey. The half-day workshop was facilitated by the SPLT team, in conjunction with MGSE MTeach recipients of a 'DreamLarge' student engagement grant (awarded for this purpose).

The workshop was part of a broader program for the visitors, with visits to a selection of other Melbourne institutions such as the National Gallery Victoria and the Melbourne Museum. Students also visited two Victorian high schools (Bundoora Secondary College and Nossal High) to further the opportunities for cultural and knowledge exchange. For many of the students it was their first trip to the big city, and the school commented that they 'engaged in experiences and activities on this excursion that will be long remembered'.

The workshop was attended by a group of approximately 50 participants who were selected by the SPLT team with the awareness that students were presenting and engaging in a socially and culturally unfamiliar environment. The attendees were an interdisciplinary and inter-cultural group of University members and external partners known to the SPLT project.

While the workshop was a 'first' for many of the visiting students and staff, it was likewise a first of its kind for both faculties in partnership through the SPLT project team, the AVRU and the MGSE, and also for the UoM. The workshop facilitated access to Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems around education, art, culture and biodiversity, improving equity and diversity of cultural perspectives and furthering opportunities for intercultural knowledge partnerships.

The participatory workshop's fulfilment of project objectives

- Augmenting Indigenous perspectives within the University
- Raising Aboriginal students' aspirations for engagement in further education

The workshop made small yet significant inroads to its objectives,

in line with the SPLT team's MSEI project funding proposal, to support sustainable educational partnerships to advance social equity. One of the parallel intents of this workshop was to open UoM up to the presence and perspectives of low-SES students from a remote community. In doing so, it aimed to promote and raise these students' aspirations for engagement in further education, endeavouring to redress imbalances within institutional course/program development highlighted by the Bradley Review (2008).

One way the workshop sought to do this was to give students a space of their own within the (unfamiliar) higher education institution, and to encourage a sense of this being a place where students could feel confident and comfortable. The students used this space to create an environment in which to share their experiences, knowledge and culture. The impact of the participatory workshop on student confidence and sense of achievement was communicated by a College staff member via email after their Melbourne visit, stating that the workshop

created a conducive environment for our students to talk and, most importantly, build confidence. One of my highlights was seeing the students mingle with the crowd at the presentation, describing their work and showing what great things they have created and learnt at school.

The workshop sought equally to enrich the taught curriculum at both Maningrida College and UoM to reflect more appropriately Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies. The workshop reached UoM representatives from differing perspectives, ranging from those involved in senior management, research and teaching to students. The workshop similarly enabled the sharing of perspectives from students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, and community elders, offering an opportunity for rich cultural and knowledge exchange between representatives of various groups.

Mason and Diddo [made] a heart-felt and thoughtful representation on the history of the LoC program, the meaning of Lurr'a and the important role of respect in working together with Indigenous people. Heleana spoke with pride and experience about the importance of cultural education and what it is to understand and walk in 'both worlds' of the Balanda and Aboriginal ... The students themselves acted as hosts, working the crowd, answering questions and giving people a direct understanding of their country and community

... [they were] spreading the message of the LoC program and the great outcomes being delivered by our School.

News of the workshop spread, with Maningrida College Learning on Country coordinator, Shane Bailey, writing an article 'Learning on Country goes to the Big City' to inform other LoC programs in the NT about the Melbourne visit in the Learning on Country Maningrida: Indigenous Ranger Cadetship Program, Inaugural Quarterly Newsletter December 2013. The city visit was praised by colleagues at ANU, who stated that

[t]his is a fantastic little bit of info for our evaluation work and clearly demonstrates the ability of the LOC approach to provide connections and growth beyond the immediate confines of Maningrida, or the local community. This is an important point in combating some suggestions that localised approaches might produce low expectations and lack of understanding of the broader world.

Documenting insights into working with Indigenous communities and educators

The receipt of a UoM CCRAAG grant offered an opportunity to document the workshop to offer new insights into working with Indigenous communities and educators. An external specialist was contracted to film the day's proceedings. With appropriate College and Community permissions, the filming will enable broader University and community access to the workshop. It will form an important record that will be a resource for future purposes such as further teaching, research, partnership-development and engagement.

Finally, in line with the MSEI funding, the workshop proceeded with knowledge that the relationships between staff and students, College and University groups are crucial to the sustainability of the partnership. The school principal offered his thanks, stating, 'this experience will have powerful short and long-term outcomes.' It was reflected upon by the LoC coordinator

Our assisting entourage included University of Melbourne graduate teachers who established a great rapport with our students and provided a powerful and enthusiastic support

base to our activities. Through this partnership with the University of Melbourne we have strengthened existing partnerships and formed new relationships with important and influential educational professionals and opened up potential opportunities for the future of our students, to the benefit of our Community. I have never been so proud to have been part of a venture that achieved so many worthwhile outcomes and focussed so intently on the development of students through actual experience. Thanks again to the students and to ALL involved.

It was hoped that bringing diverse Indigenous perspectives into the University emphasised cultural knowledge exchange and valued place-based knowledge, pedagogy, and the relationships between people and places. Strengthening these interdisciplinary connections across UoM was intended to actively support and encourage Maningrida College students' participation in higher education. Similarly, it was hoped that this would act as a pilot towards further future University engagement with Indigenous communities and partners, prioritising cultural identities, social diversity and community, working against discrimination for the advancement of human rights.

Maningrida College Learning on Country coordinator, Shane Bailey, wrote an article 'Learning on Country goes to the Big City' to inform other LoC programs in the NT about the Melbourne visit in the Learning on Country Maningrida: Indigenous Ranger Cadetship Program, Inaugural Quarterly Newsletter December 2013.

Outreach achievements, connections and collaborations

There have been some notable outcomes of the MSEI funded project that were not deliverables but are worthy of mention and, in some instances, celebration.

- UoM team members wrote the submission for the NAB Schools impact award (\$30,000). Funds from the grant assisted the 2013 Maningrida College visit to Melbourne with support from listed contributing UoM partner schools and agencies. It was the only award of this kind

in the NT and one of 25 throughout Australia. <http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/2013schools/maningrida-college>

- 2013 Dreamlarge grant (\$2500) awarded to UoM MTeach candidates with Dr Sally Godinho mentoring the team. Candidates assisted in planning the Learning on City visit, organized and funded transport to all program venues, planned and funded the welcome and farewell celebrations, and supported the Maningrida students and staff throughout the visit. The online report 'Maningrida Meets Melbourne' published in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education News and Activities, http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/news/news_articles/archive/2013/maningrida_meets_melbourne (18 December, 2013)
- Given the interfaculty profile of SPLT and its Indigenous science engagement elements, SPLT team member Dr Ken Winkel was invited to contribute to a successful UoM HEPPP Funding Application, 'Incorporating Indigenous Perspectives into Science Teaching and Learning' (\$19,320) headed by Associate Professor Michelle Livett within the Faculty of Science. The project will generate academic skill development materials and strategies to support effective learning in the foundation science and mathematics subjects of the Bachelor of Science (extended), and modelled in the initial foundation science subjects of the degree. The distinctive character of the materials and strategies developed in the project will be their careful integration of an understanding of Indigenous perspectives of science and technology and the contributions of Indigenous people to the development of science and technology.
- Two MTeach candidates placed at Maningrida College for the elective subject, Education, Pedagogy and Place are now employed in the NT (James Stephens at Maningrida College and Sophie Grambeau at Nhulunbuy).
- An enrolment in the MTeach primary course of an Indigenous student (Bernadette Uren) with the assistance of UOM team members and Professor Julie Mcleod.
- Connections have been made with MGSE educators and ANU researchers and executives who are involved in place-

based learning programs in the NT, including support and evaluation of Learning on Country programs. A meeting was held at UoM on 7th March, 2014. Four areas were identified to grow potential partnerships across the two Universities, targeting a strong equity focus within their convergent activities. Further meetings will be held in 2014 to consolidate the relationship.

- SPLT initiated a meeting of UoM researchers involved in projects across Arnhem Land in conjunction with the Melbourne Engagement and Partnerships Office. Two meetings in late 2013 and early 2014 have linked the SPLT team with researchers working in similar areas and locations. Potential for further partnership and/or collaboration has been identified with researchers in the School of Languages and Linguistics and the Research Unit for Indigenous Languages.

Findings from the MSEI funded research have been disseminated at two conferences.

- Sharing Place Learning Together: Mutual capacity and partnership building (Woolley, Godinho, Winkel & Webb). Paper presented at the AARE Annual International Conference, Adelaide, 1 – 5 December, 2013,
- Making the invisible visible: The Sharing Place, Learning Together project (Woolley, M., Godinho, S., Webb, J., & Winkel, K.). Paper presented at Imagining Social Equity Conference, Melbourne, 28 February – 1 March, 2014.

Collaborations with the following groups and organisations formed part of Maningrida College's November visit to Melbourne and the participatory workshop: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Zoo, Melbourne Museum, Nossal High School, Bundoora High School, and FareShare. These groups contributed in-kind support to the Melbourne visit, tailoring activities to the students program in collaboration with the SPLT team. Nossal High School and Bundoora High School are now building partnerships with the school for cross-cultural and knowledge exchanges.

Postscript reflections and partnership recommendations

Communication from the school following the 2013 Learning on City visit is testimony to the goodwill and benefits that the MSEI funding facilitated, and indicated a strengthening and growing of the SPLT partnership. The affirmation of the capacity building from a range of community stakeholders aligned with the MSEI research findings that acknowledged the UoM's ongoing support for Indigenous educational endeavours and for identifying mutual benefits and outcomes. Importantly, the outreach of the MSEI funding signals potential opportunities that can be pursued beyond the duration of this funding to augment Indigenous perspectives within the University and raise Aboriginal students' aspirations for engagement in further education.

The SPLT project has now moved beyond the formative stage of relationship-building and establishing trust, to requiring a formal collaborative documentation of the partnership and its goals. A recent visit to the College has highlighted the aforementioned communication issues raised in the research findings, and underscored the need for written documentation that gives all stakeholders access to the partnership framework and agreed shared goals. The trend of transience amongst school teaching staff and the suddenness with which they sometimes leave does not always afford the necessary succession planning and hand over time. The strength of the SPLT partnership has been vulnerable to such changes. Therefore, a clearly articulated framework for the partnership, including the goals, is essential.

Recommendations for those seeking to develop partnerships in remote Aboriginal community settings are informed by the literature (see for example, Altman et al., 2011; Ens et al., 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Ens & Towler 2011; Jackson et al., 2011; May & Ens, 2011; Riley & Genner, 2011) and have evolved over our time within the Maningrida College Community. The key concepts of collaboration and communication are integral to these recommendations:

- begin with local knowledge systems of place and seek opportunities for transfer of traditional knowledge and skills to the focus of the project or research;

- employ respectful listening and acknowledgment of cultural knowledge;
- engage in ongoing dialogue, consultation and collaboration with knowledge-holders to ensure local Aboriginal cultural content and concepts are 'built in – not bolted on' (Riley & Genner, 2011) and to take into account the local complexities and constraints;
- focus on relationship-building to establish trust before commencement of research;
- recognize the need for regular face-to-face communication to sustain engagement and impact;
- be inclusive and identify ways of communicating research/ project goals with all community members;
- define and document collaboratively the goals of the partnership and ensure all key stakeholders are familiar with the partnership framework; and
- plan for succession and for induction of new staff and project team members.

Above all, those seeking to form partnerships in remote communities must be 'countered by humility and an equal commitment to listen carefully to criticism' (Apple, 2013, p. 21).

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