

"A Room With All Views?": The Aboriginal Community Room as a Site and Metaphor

**Paper Presented at AARE 1999 Annual Conference, Melbourne,
December**

Geoff Munns	Lee Simpson	Sue Clancy
University of Western Sydney Macarthur	Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga	Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga
97726449	0269 332457	0269 33 2437
g.munns@uws.edu.au	lsimpson@csu.edu.au	sclancy@csu.edu.au

Introduction

This paper considers how productive personal and pedagogical relationships can be catalysed and formed within the hub of schools' Aboriginal community rooms if it becomes a genuine meeting place where Aboriginal people can feel "at home" and where non-Aboriginal people can come, talk, share and learn. The paper argues that if this is the case, the community room is then both a critical school site and a metaphor for effective, inclusive and empowering curriculum.

The *Baiyai* Research Project

Since 1997 the Baiyai Research Project has been looking at the nature of classroom relationships between young Aboriginal learners and their teachers. Its theoretical, empirical and epistemological foundations are captured in its *Wiradjuri* title. Baiyai means "meeting place of two parties". The project brings together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, teachers and community members and considers all of their perspectives in the collection and analysis of data and the dissemination of results.

The *Baiyai* Pedagogical Literacy Relationship

One of the key findings of the project has been in the development of the *Baiyai* concept of the *Pedagogical Literacy Relationship* (henceforth PLR). The research team presented data

showing that in classrooms with Aboriginal learners in different research sites there were particular relationships generated in the interplay of students' and teachers' responses during all literacy and language classroom episodes. The *Baiyai* Project and the conceptualisation of the PLR is described by Munns, Simpson, Connelly and Townsend (1999). Implications of the PLR for the understanding of Aboriginal English in classrooms are discussed in Simpson, Munns and Clancy (1999).

The *Baiyai* Interactive CD-Rom

As the PLR was being developed it became apparent that the complexity of the relationships, the concept of levels of understanding and the amount of data generated was not able to be easily represented. Initial two-dimensional representations could only offer condensed glimpses of the PLR not readily understood by those outside of the project. To overcome this dilemma the research team decided to convert, expand and illustrate the model through interactive computer software. It was felt that the production of a computer cd-rom would allow educators to explore the model and its different levels and categories in their own way. Furthermore, this development would allow for much more detail to be offered throughout, and greater incorporation of the words and ideas of Aboriginal participants in *Baiyai*. Most importantly, there was a belief that this media would fulfil the *Baiyai* aim of encouraging more teachers to meet on equal terms with Aboriginal people.

The Metaphor – "A Room With All Views"

As work proceeded on the cd-rom the *Baiyai* team reasoned that success would depend on whether it would be used by its main target group of teachers of Aboriginal students. It was this group who the team envisaged would use the PLR and be encouraged to reflect on and consider ways that they could adjust their own teaching practices in order to make them more successful in producing equitable outcomes for their learners. It became apparent that use of the cd-rom by teachers would depend on two interdependent aspects: the content and the graphics/interface. As mentioned above, the *Baiyai* title had already captured the sharing of methods and viewpoints that were at the heart of what the project meant for all of its contributors. It was a metaphor as much as it was a title. This metaphor was extended in the conviction that a school's Aboriginal Community Room was a place that had the potential to offer a genuine meeting place for the two parties critical for the success of Aboriginal students at school. The Community Room was where Aboriginal people often felt comfortable at the school. It was also where non-Aboriginal people could meet and talk with Aboriginal people, to become socially and culturally closer and to find out about ways to more effective communication. Here was a site that could catalyse more effective classroom practices. At its best it was a room that could accommodate all views: Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, student, community members, teachers. And so it came to be that the image of the generic Aboriginal Community Room with its common physical and symbolic features was taken up as the graphic metaphor through which users would navigate the *Baiyai* cd-rom.

What Do Some Aboriginal Community Rooms Look Like?

Having taken up this image as the key symbol for the cd-rom's content and navigation, the research team considered what physically and symbolically constituted a *Baiyai* Community Room and what it meant for all people who met there. This was done by visiting a number of different community rooms at all levels of education and talking to key people who used the room. In this process it became evident that the community room was, at the same time, a physical space as well as a concept. It was a place within an educational setting where members of the Aboriginal community felt comfortable to come together with other people. Most encounters are informal nature, even though rooms are typically used for meetings.

Before turning to common features and characteristics of community rooms visited, we now want to provide a brief description of a number of settings in both urban and rural contexts.

- **Aboriginal Pre-school**

The pre-school is set up specifically to help ease the transition of young Aboriginal children into the school setting before their formal schooling commences. Officially it houses a small group of Aboriginal students who will commence primary school next year. There is a full time non-Aboriginal teacher and two part-time Aboriginal assistants. The school also has an AEA who regularly works with the pre-school community as well as the rest of the school.

The school does not have an official community room, so meetings that involve the Aboriginal community are held in the staff room. This has its own set of difficulties in that it is exceedingly difficult to get people to attend. The AEA attributes this to the fact that most of parents 'have bad memories of school'. Another woman, one of the part time Aboriginal assistants explained that, 'I work here and when I go there I feel like I'm trespassing'. Both these women are exploring the possibility of running their meetings at another site, away from the school.

However in a more informal sense, the pre-school room, seems to be performing the function of an unofficial community room. It is a busy space where there is constant interaction between all members of the community. The room itself is situated at the end of a much larger building, just a short distance from a front gate. This means that anyone coming into it from the street does not have to pass through any playground areas or any other classrooms. Inside, the room is set up as a pre-school room, but there is limited formal school furniture and there is an electric jug, mugs and a container of biscuits on a small table. There is a range of Aboriginal displays, a map of tribal areas, pieces of red, black and yellow cloth draped together.

Each morning the children arrive accompanied by their family. The door has been set up as an informal notice board that gives reminders and information about what is happening and often the teacher or one of the assistants will greet them and also add a verbal comment about what is on the door. Sometimes the children are left at the door but often they all come in together. Family members chat with the teacher, the assistants or else talk between themselves and the children. At other times the adults will actively join the children and help them with what they are doing or simply sit and watch them at work. This is an important part of the day, when both personal and pedagogical links are being formed. The staff has the opportunity to understand the needs and expectations of the community, and the community can become familiar with the environment being experienced by the next generation of school students.

During the day a range of people call in. On most days the principal will come in and wander around informally, chatting with individual students about themselves, their families or what they are actually doing. The AEA and school assistant are regular visitors, the children from the kindergarten room next door will pop their heads in the door to check out what is going on and older brothers and sisters come to see what is happening.

- **The Primary School**

The community room is a converted classroom sitting in the middle of the school among other classrooms. It is headquarters of the AEA and is also used by a teacher employed to assist young Aboriginal learners with literacy. The room has a fridge and facilities for making tea and coffee. A lunch program operates there daily, often with parents who just drop into the room to give a hand. There are Aboriginal resources and posters around the room with

Aboriginal messages (reconciliation, education, health, survival). School produced posters give out messages of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students sharing and working together. Community meetings are held in the room (ASSPA, AECG) but informal meetings seem to be one of the most important uses. Parents and community people often come into the room to have a yarn. The AEA "offers them a cuppa and we just talk about anything." It's a very important room not only for the school but for the whole community. Aboriginal kids use the room as a drop-in place when they feel like getting away from the playground. Some teachers use the room at lunch times, often making themselves a lunch. It's not uncommon for a group of teachers, the AEA, community people and students to be in the room sitting around and talking. The room is particularly important for students who are experiencing difficulties at school, the most important room in the school. Here they can have physical and emotional needs looked after. It's a refuge when they are not happy. The AEA uses the room as a safe haven, sometimes just sitting and reflecting. The room is a place where there is lots of laughter and humour and warmth, where students can escape the pressures of school and classroom life. Often this escape gives them the chance to be themselves and this helps with how they are viewed in the school. The AEA talked about this:

Sometimes a few of the older boys will come here and sit and I say, "You better go out to the playground" and they say, "No, we want to sit in here and yarn with you" and they do and it's good because other people in here see the kids differently ... I act differently with the kids in this room, I joke with them and we just do like silly stuff and they look at me and they're shocked.

In the community room Aboriginal English holds sway. As the AEA explains, "I just talk like we do at home, mix a few words in, we just talk and go on silly with each other ... "

- **The High School**

The high school has approximately 85 Aboriginal students. Many Aboriginal parents and carers enrol their children at this school because it has a reputation for looking after its Aboriginal students. It has two AEAs. "The Ab-Studies Room" is the community room at this school. It serves and has many purposes. It is the office of the AEAs and it is the classroom for teaching Aboriginal Studies. Also it is where meetings are held for ASSPA, the schools Aboriginal Studies Curriculum advisory committee, and any other meetings pertaining to Aboriginal issues. While this room caters for all of these school type activities it also is a place where on arrival, you are offered a cup of coffee or tea. There is a fridge, microwave, coffee and tea making facilities available. Often there is bread and some sandwich fillings and fruit in the fridge for those students who have not brought their lunch. This is where community people go to if they want to see the AEA. Students go there if they need assistance from the AEAs, if they want to do some school work, use the computer to do an assignment or just to play some games. Sometimes they just want a place to "hang out". The room is where Aboriginal Studies is taught.

Parents and community usually only visit the "community room" when they have a need. When there are cultural activities happening at the school, this room becomes the meeting place. If there are any matters parents want to discuss with the AEAs or school staff, this becomes the initial meeting place. It should be noted however, that when the principal wants to speak to a community member about a "serious issue" this is always conducted in the principal's office.

Teachers visit the "community room" to speak to the AEAs about students they have in their class and to gather Aboriginal resources. The formal structures of school tend not to exist within this room, even the teaching of the Aboriginal Studies subjects seem to take on a less formal structure. This does not mean to say that productive work is not carried out.

The room has a distinctive Aboriginal atmosphere. This is created by the Aboriginal design on the curtains, the artefacts within the display case and spread throughout the room, the Aboriginal posters on the walls, the Aboriginal murals painted on the walls, the Aboriginal resources housed within the room. There are murals that have been painted by students from Aboriginal Studies and Art classes outside the room.

- **Aboriginal Education Unit in a University**

The community room at this support unit in a university is a combination of spaces, each with its own purpose. There is a specific area where a number of computers are housed for student use. There is a small room allocated for quiet study and a main area where students can sit at a table and work with peers. There are clusters of comfortable chairs where groups of students can sit and discuss work or meet socially. There is a small kitchenette where students, staff and visitors can make tea or coffee and store their lunch.

The shared community room area is also where meetings are held (students, staff, informal). Often the more formal staff meetings are held at another venue, creating less disruption to students and ensuring confidentiality.

Many of the furnishings in the room have Aboriginal designs on them. There are many posters around the walls of the rooms, both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are flown outside the building on a daily basis. Artefacts are in a display case, with Aboriginal resources also on display. You will most often find the *Koori Mail* (Aboriginal newspaper) sitting on one of the coffee tables. An abundance of educational support material is scattered around the rooms in bookshelves and cupboards. There are photocopying, printing and telephone facilities available to the students.

Within this space staff and students work and socialise together. Like other community rooms this one has the feeling of comfort, the formalities of university are not here, yet it provides place and facilities needed to function outside this room but inside the university.

All staff from the Director to the Receptionist interact with visitors within the community room. University staff and students visit for a number of reasons, often to get information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. Aboriginal community and professionals come for meetings, other business or just for a chat.

This community room has a sense of welcoming. Even though it is often a very busy place with many people doing their own work, you can always find someone to help you out or have a chat if that is what is needed. In this relaxed but industrious environment people are never too busy to help or share.

What Is It About The Community Room?

It can be seen by the descriptions of the physical characteristics and functions of these different community rooms that there are some common and significant features (not all need be present, however).

- **Location** – They are usually physically located within the grounds, but often close to a gate, away from the main office. It is apparent that they are linked with the other buildings and part of the school, but there may be something distinctive about how they look and feel (see below).
- **Accessibility** – In the way they are staffed and set up community rooms offer parents and carers a place to talk when they feel comfortable. Unlike other places in

the school where you have to make an appointment, or wait until the teacher isn't teaching. Community comes first.

- **Characteristics** – They are typically friendly, welcoming, casual, relaxed, industrious, busy, buzzing, happy, sharing, helping.
- **A Safe Place** – Students can go to the community room when any school need arises (comfort, education, support, family, school "trouble"). Here there will be somebody to listen, give a hand, go in to bat for them.
- **Kinds of things that are happening** - Teaching and learning, communication – oral, written, informal and formal between staff, family and friends. Aboriginal English dominates.
- **Variations within community rooms** – Usually only in some physical aspects. It is important to see that different rooms and spaces can become community rooms, regardless of their original and/or official designation.
- **Egalitarian and Welcoming** – There is access to all – teacher, principal, admin, parents, caregivers, nans. Everyone who comes and visits is welcome and made to feel comfortable – there is no obvious signs that any particular individual is in control. The parents/caregivers, school principal, administrative staff, teachers, other students, are all made to feel equally welcome. This is a place where we all care and share.
- **Atmosphere** – The atmosphere is inclusive and informal.
- **Cultural aspects** – Community rooms commonly display different features of traditional and contemporary culture artifacts – didgeridoos, clap sticks, coolamon, nulla nullas, carved emu eggs, boomerangs, posters displaying political messages, displays of Red, Black & Yellow (Aboriginal colours) and Green, Blue, Black & White (Torres Strait Islander colours). They are clearly Aboriginal spaces.
- **Feel** - The place is familiar and comfortable – the formalities of school are not here.
- **Furnishings** – The room looks and feels more like a home than a classroom - lounge, bean bags, Aboriginal prints on furnishings, curtains.
- **Meeting place** – Official meetings are held in the room (for example, ASSPA, AECG, KOMOC, curriculum advisory meetings). Perhaps more important are the other meetings (a place to come and yarn and have a laugh, a place to meet before going onto another venue).
- **School material and office equipment** – Usually there is some school and office equipment - computer, paint, pens, paper, desks, chairs, tables, chairs, telephone, photocopier. Community rooms are places where school work and homework can be done in informal and different surroundings.
- **Kitchen** - In some community rooms the kitchen might be an electric jug and a few cups sitting on a table in the corner, with tea/coffee making facilities.
- **Resources** – Community rooms often have Aboriginal resources that can be used by students and borrowed by teachers.

Although community rooms have a special purpose and significance for the whole Aboriginal community, their critical importance is arguably for the Aboriginal kids. It is here they can do school work, have a chat, visit family, feel safe, grab a sandwich, find a shirt or some shoelaces, find out some school information, talk about something that is troubling them, just have a yarn, find out information about Aboriginal issues, play the didgeridu, surf the net ...

A Site and a Metaphor

There are good reasons to suggest that Aboriginal community rooms are the most important rooms in educational settings where there are numbers of Aboriginal students. It has been the intent of this paper to not only describe some characteristics of these multi-function meeting places, but also to consider what they signify for the Aboriginal community. Our

suggestion here is that the community room is both a place and a concept, and we represent this physical, symbolic and cultural significance in the following figure.

Figure 1

Physical, Symbolic and Cultural Significance of the Aboriginal Community Room

Community rooms are physical spaces where you can be looked after in a culturally appropriate way. They are symbolic of the possibility of productive and empowering links between community, school and the wider society. They are places where Aboriginal people can come and belong without compromising their Aboriginality.

As a metaphor for effective, inclusive and empowering curriculum they offer salient insights into ways that classrooms may be structured to advantage Aboriginal learners. This may encourage teachers to think about how their classrooms are places where learners can talk the way their mob talks and that's accepted. They are places that learners trust and want to go to even when things are not working. There is an informality that breaks down enduring barriers. In these classrooms, learners are understood and accepted for who they are without having to compromise or apologise. Classrooms are able to meet all their educational needs.

There is a genuine *Baiyai*.

References

Munns, G., Simpson, L., Connelly, J. & Townsend, T. (1999) *Baiyai – meeting place of two parties: the pedagogical literacy relationship*, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 22, 2, pp. 147-164.

Simpson, L., Munns, G. and Clancy, S. (1999) *Language Tracks: Aboriginal English and the classroom*. Newtown: PETA.