Fire, lamb chops and engagement: Practice and theory entanglements in remote Aboriginal education

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It’s shortly before 9am on a Monday morning in April 2003. I’m a Land and Resource Management lecturer with the Faculty of Indigenous Research and Education at Charles Darwin University and I’m heading to Pine Creek for the week to deliver training to the relatively new Aboriginal Ranger group, the Wagiman Rangers. The university troop carrier (aka troopy) is loaded up with enrolment forms, course documents, GPS units and maps, my swag, tent, esky and a bag of clothes.

My first stop is Kybrook Farm, an Aboriginal community just south of Pine Creek about 200 kms south of Darwin. It’s just before lunch and I begin the process of picking up people and their things for our week together down around Claravale Crossing on the upper Daly River, maybe another 100 or so ks away. I wend my way around the small community of Kybrook Farm and slowly the Troopy fills: people, blankets, an esky, plastic shopping bags filled with loaves of white bread, a tin of flour and a number of foam mattresses. We head off, as we drive we listen to some tapes, Johnny Cash mostly, and talk: about weeds, pigs, cattle, lizards, relations with neighbours, erosion, kangaroos, about where things were heading, fencing, cattle yards, employment, income, indoor cricket and things to do.

We arrive at Claravale Crossing in the late afternoon, and I approach Jabul, the old man coordinating the group (or father or uncle to most of them). He has a few things he wants to get done this week. One is to travel north through country still under a land claim to check out a story he’s heard about clearing that might taking place. The other is to continue with burning around the Ah Toy block, where we are currently staying. We decide that it would make sense and achieve course outcomes if tomorrow morning we continue with the burning. Later in the week we could go north.

Tuesday morning, after breakfast we head off to burn. We light a series of small fires on the westerly side of a well-worn track which burn their way slowly back to the track before going out. It is the perfect weather and conditions for it: the grass is dry, but not too dry, the wind is light and the day is warm, with the feelings of dryness that accompany the early ‘Dry’ season in the Top End. There is also enough moisture around to bring on a little dew at night time to help extinguish any remnant fire that remains after we finish.
Upon returning to the camp we talk as a group with Jabul about what we should do tomorrow. Everyone is keen on heading up to the north a little way where we could do some more burning while also looking for the land clearing that Jabul had heard about. We decide that heading north is what we’ll do.

Wednesday morning is cool and crisp. I eat my muesli and position my coffee maker in the coals. I sit back in my camping chair and look over some of the elements of competency for the unit ‘Undertake traditional burning practices’. As I drink my coffee I look over at the main camp and expect to see everyone doing what they always do: drinking tea, moseying about, talking with each other. And they sort of are, though I have a sense that something is going on which is out of the ordinary. It is not that they are not doing these things, it is just that they are somehow doing them differently: rather than talking as they normally do they seem to be hanging about, looking into the distance or into their cup of tea. Whatever it is it doesn’t seem like it is serious, but it is out of the ordinary.

All of a sudden it starts to make some kind of sense as Patrick comes over. He is a young man, one of Jabul and Ivy’s sons. He delicately, perhaps even gingerly, explains that Ivy needs to go into Pine Creek to get some more food, and, that as I have the only vehicle I am the one who needs to take her. But hang on, if we do this we can't go up north like we’d planned. I do not know what to say and the look on my face was, I am sure, one of blankness if not some sort of horror! I felt backed into a corner and thoughts run through my mind—snap, snap, snap: this would be so clearly not part of university business, shop runs are not part of my work program; it will cost another $100 in fuel—how will I justify that; taking Ivy means I won’t be teaching, which is what I should be doing; there is no way I can refuse to take Ivy because no-one will do anything until this problem is satisfactorily dealt with (which means taking her to Pine Creek); Ivy should not be going in the university vehicle as she is not a student and therefore may not be covered by the university’s insurance policy. These and other thoughts cascade through my mind. Yet at the same time I also feel like the decision has already been made, and I haven’t been part of the decision making team (even though, clearly, it hasn’t).

'I’ll have to think about it,' I say, and with that Patrick walks away to report back to the group. I stand there in a state of suspended animation. I feel like I don’t have much time to formulate a response. Yet I know that I need some time. I know I am being watched and my not answering is being observed and reflected upon, and would contribute to me being positioned in certain ways by the observers. Yet looking at them it was clear that they are uncomfortable, each in their different ways. They know I could say no, but they must also realise that I’d have to break some rules to say yes. Out of all of them I think that Ivy is the least concerned—she probably knows I’ll say yes. Either way I have to make a choice, and I have a sense that the choice I make will determine to a huge degree the nature of our ongoing training relationship.

I do say yes, in the end, and take Ivy to Pine Creek. We lose a day of burning, gain some lamb chops and get to listen to Johnny Cash again. But I also gain insights from two related disconcertments grounded in that difficult moment.
The first disconcertment was how I felt when I was asked. In the moments that followed the request I felt like I had nothing on which to grasp to give me that feeling of solidity, of sureness, that enabled me to confidently make a decision, one way or another. All of a sudden I found myself in a new space where I didn't know the rules, by which I mean that none of my interactions to that point had prepared me for such a situation. And if I didn't know the rules (or they didn't yet exist), then how could I know the implications of any decision I might make? I couldn't, and didn't know what to do. I hadn't had to confront something like this before. In hindsight I have come to see that my shock possibly stemmed from the fact that this request revealed that my understanding of my position and the work we were doing together was not a shared one. Up until that point I had taken as a given that there was a neat and (I thought) uncontroversial distinction between me (as a representative of the university) and them (as members of their own Aboriginal group). It was not just that I suddenly noticed that I saw myself differently than did the people I was working with. It was also that the moment revealed these categories to be ones that are made by me (notably in this case not us) and my materials: university position, white male, textbooks and curriculum, university vehicle, etc. On reflection, I can also see that, flawed as those categories might have been in terms of understanding what we were doing together, they were crucial in providing me with a stability that allowed me to function. The categories were part of a habit that I had built up over time that enabled me to make sense of why I was there and therefore to keep on doing what I was doing. I can now see that what I am doing most of the time is reinvigorating and redoing the categories that I assume to already be at work (and this I think is what we all do, for the most part). However it also showed me that I need to be open to the possibility that the categories might not make sense, and need to be jettisoned. Importantly this does not mean abandoning the categories with which I work, but be open to them being challenged and renegotiated on the basis of my experiences in the world.

My other disconcertment was related to how I felt about having said yes. On a fundamental level I felt disconcerted because saying yes was a statement about what I thought was important: what kind of person I was and would become. In choosing to align myself with the needs of the group in which I found myself (which meant going to Pine Creek) I was consciously choosing to not go on with the burning. This meant not doing that which was supposedly my ‘real job’—to ‘teach units from the Resource Management course to enrolled students’. However this version of my ‘real job’ relies on the prejudice that I am the only one in a position to say what my job is. I am in fact being produced by the situations in which I find myself and whose participants include people, objects, including in this case the vehicle, my physical being, ideas, concepts, and the surroundings, amongst other things. In a sense my disconcertment revolved around the necessity at that point of making an explicit choice as to which system defined me (which up until then I had found ways to weave together). On the one hand I had the university that encouraged me to be the cognitive authority: the one who knew; whose job was to ‘deliver’ training to those who wanted it. On the other there was a group of people who had seen an opportunity to gain resources and opportunities through signing up for training and considered the work we were doing together to be yet another opportunity to create the world, both social and physical, that drew on the old while welcoming the new. In the end the disconcertment was about relinquishing the fantasy that I was the sole definer of what counted, and the fears that went along with that as an employee of the
university. And to follow up on the earlier point, saying yes was a step to making new categories, new ways of acting, new realities.

I found myself in a moment in which any number of new realities could have been brought into being. The experience enabled me to see the work that I do differently, and with greater appreciation of the work that goes on in social settings within which people are creating themselves and others in an ongoing iterative dance. Seeing myself and the people I work with as participants in collective action, creating the world together, has enabled me to rethink my work and the world that emerges as a result of it. My disconcerting experience, although unique, is (I am sure) similar to ones had by many others who do their work in inter-cultural spaces in places like the Northern Territory of Australia.

So what is going on when we head out and participate in the world in which different languages are spoken and different cultures are being performed? What does doing things together mean for us and for those who come after us? Being conscious of what I am creating, and the choices I make in doing so, enables me to rethink what it means to do my job properly. Critically this process is one that takes place in the moment; I am a participant (not an onlooker) and can only develop a sense of my role, and the responsibilities that go with it in the real world, on a moment to moment basis. Further they are products of the collective action; they are not something that I work out alone. This incident showed me that it is in those things that I try to define myself that are most likely to not work in the hurly burly that is life in the world.

Looking back I can see that all the things I had learnt about the group: their individual members, their country, their history, their aspirations, their attitude to our work together, were produced through social interaction which involved us cautiously finding out about each other, sometimes probing, sometimes sitting back. What we were producing and what it might mean nobody knew, but as we went on together, and found out more about each other, we were more able to both probe more deeply as well as stay silent more easily. And from that point we were able to do new and different things together: to go on together in new ways.