



Research Briefing - First Peoples Service Learning Project Australia 2012-2014

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The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum, cultural awareness and content in Australian higher education has often been presented in an abstract manner that is removed from the lived experience of Indigenous culture and traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for sharing knowledge (Newsome 1999). Mackinlay & Dunbar-Hall (2003) have suggested that these in-class learning experiences can lack the intercultural relationships required to promote reconciliation and deeper understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of seeing and being. Building on four years of work in Central and Western Australia, this project takes students from three different universities to work with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on service learning projects in the arts. These projects involve students working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and Elders on community-led arts based service learning projects such as recording and writing albums, documenting cultural activities, managing community festivals, and running school programs. Through the project we aim to demonstrate how collaborative service learning projects between students and communities can develop intercultural understanding, deepen non Indigenous students' appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and support local communities through arts activities that have direct benefit to them. The project will produce a range of public outcomes including: resources and materials on establishing arts based service learning projects; a project website; and a variety of academic publications and presentations.

What does service learning involve? Service learning has the dual aim of enriching learning and strengthening communities. The core concept is the combination of service and learning objectives, with activities designed to positively affect both service recipient and provider (Furco & Billig, 2002). Higher education students who have engaged in service learning have been found to demonstrate greater complexities of understanding than non-service learning comparison groups (Eyler & Giles, 1999), thus service learning has emerged as an effective pedagogical strategy with benefits beyond the integration of community service into the academic curriculum (Cho, 2006; Robinson & Meyer, 2012). Furco (1996) emphasised that service learning programs were distinguished from other forms of experiential education by 'their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring' (p. 5). For many authors, service learning is also defined by shared control over projects between educators and community participants (see Boyle-Baise et al., 2001); 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 (Soska et al., 2010; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Arts based service learning: Educators in the USA have explored arts based service learning (ABSL) as a subset of service learning that can connect students and community members and promote community arts practice, placing "art in a community context as both a creative practice and a teaching method to fulfill arts-based educational objectives ranging from creative self-expression to competency with discipline-specific standards" (Krensky & Steffen, 2008, p. 15). ABSL 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" (Krensky & Steffen, 2008, p. 15). The existing literature on ABSL lists the benefits as: facilitating expression, communication and connections between diverse participants; evoking participants' strengths and abilities (Thomas & Mulvey, 2008); developing empathy and compassion between participants and for other groups (Molnar, 2010); building community through "empathetic social interaction" (Jeffers, 2009, p. 19); providing opportunities to inquire into and affirm "personal, cultural, or spiritual values" (Jeffers, 2009, p. 18); and providing the ability to "mirror" society in the form of artworks and "subsequently invoke social change" (Molnar, 2010, p. 19). We argue that many of these benefits are highly compatible with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives of service learning. These perspectives have been identified in the existing literature and in our own ABSL work with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Yet, while some attention has been paid to using ABSL with culturally and linguistically diverse communities (see Southcott & Joseph, 2010), little attention has been given to specific applications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia or elsewhere.



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