



## 2010 AUCEA National Conference Communities Participation & Partnership

5 – 7 July 2010  
University of Tasmania, Launceston Campus



### **Two knowledges working together**

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### **Abstract**

Tangentyere Aboriginal researchers and Charles Darwin University (CDU) evaluators, have been working together to evaluate Akeyulerre, an Aboriginal healing centre in Alice Springs.

The healing centre offers traditional healing and cultural support for local Arrernte families in and around Alice Springs. The healing centre was established in the late 1990s. It was set up as a place for Arrernte families in Alice Springs and surrounding communities to come for a range of support services.

The CDU research team is well experienced in conducting evaluations across the Northern Territory. The Tangentyere researchers were asked to work alongside the CDU team who have the knowledge in western academic ways. The Tangentyere researchers have their own style of conducting research among their people. They recognise the need to be patient, building the trust and the respect for each other before any work can be done. The Aboriginal researchers play a vital role when conducting research within an Aboriginal environment.

Members of both teams recognised that to carry out the evaluation they must work closely with Arrernte language speakers who will be able to get the right and true information. The researchers found that by working together and understanding each other the respect was shown to each other and the outcome out of the respect for the two working parties was an evaluation report that effectively blends together the western knowledges of the University researchers and the cultural knowledges of the Aboriginal researchers.

Many individuals and/or institutions contact Tangentyere in order to carry out research on Aboriginal people on the Town Camps. Naturally, the Council has developed a set of research principles to ensure that research is of benefit to the residents involved and is conducted in a culturally protected manner.

The presentation is based on research that Tangentyere and CDU have been involved in and the principles behind the Tangentyere Council Research Program. These principles are included as “two knowledges, working together”. Presenters from the CDU and Tangentyere research and evaluation teams will offer insights they have learned from working together. Their learnings are discussed in terms of a) the time required for partnerships to develop; b) community ownership of research; c) what partnership means; d) the dilemma of living with uncertainty; e) trust and respect; and f) the importance of sharing tasks equitably.

**Key words:** evaluation, partnerships, Aboriginal research, engagement

## Two knowledges working together

### Introduction

In 2009 the Northern Territory Department of Health and Families (DHF) contracted Charles Darwin University's (CDU) Social Partnerships in Learning (SPiL) consortium to conduct an evaluation of the Akeyulerre Healing Centre in Alice Springs. Akeyulerre is a healing place designed for Arrernte families. Most of the families come from the Alice Springs region. The Centre is a place to learn, teach and reflect on culture, knowledge, language, health and well-being. Akeyulerre is characterised by its use of traditional healing and cultural knowledge and is led by Arrernte Elders.

The CDU team has considerable experience conducting evaluations and research projects in a range of diverse contexts. The team is made up of experienced academics, professionals and research practitioners, most of whom have degree qualifications. It is made up of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. This particular evaluation project however, required a set of skills and knowledge that the team did not have. This set of skills and knowledge relates to a) an understanding of the local Aboriginal context including family structures; b) local language proficiency; and c) knowledge of local Aboriginal cultural practices.

#### *Developing a partnership for evaluation*

With these limitations in mind, the CDU team began negotiations with Tangentyere Council in late 2008 with a view to forming a partnership for the evaluation project. The Tangentyere Research Group have significant experience working with Arrernte families and have developed culturally appropriate research methodologies for data gathering purposes. The researchers are Arrernte speakers and are familiar with the local context in Alice Springs. Agreement about the partnership was achieved in mid 2009 and an initial exploratory workshop was conducted in August 2009, to establish responsibilities and evaluation tasks for CDU and Tangentyere evaluators.

The CDU team was to focus on mainstream stakeholders and the Tangentyere team was to focus on participants and committee members. Data collection commenced in September 2009 and continued through to February 2010. The final report submitted to DHF in April 2010 was written jointly by both the CDU team and the Tangentyere team.

This paper draws on the learnings that have emerged from the partnership between CDU and Tangentyere. It is written from the perspectives of both partners. The voices of both groups should be self-evident to the reader.

What the three CDU researchers have is the knowledge of the western academic ways of researching. The Aboriginal Tangentyere researchers have the knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and the respect. Months passed with the researchers and the evaluation steering committee meeting up to work out how the research should be done, when the right time to do it was, and why the research had to be done for the Healing Centre. Research plays a big part in our lives. The issues we study are the real life issues that we need to deal with at any time of the day.

In the past all research was used for the western academics and Aboriginal people were not involved like today. That is why we have Aboriginal people who are now being involved with research. But we're out there to improve our day-to-day lives that involve health, alcohol, domestic violence, environment, government changes and the living standards for Aboriginal people and worthwhile policy for our people. Government needs to take a look and see what we are doing. Listening to us (Aboriginal people) has the most effect. Let us be involved with

discussions and have an input for our people. We want more recognition for who we are (local Aboriginal people) and how we do it our way and our values.

#### *The context of our work together: Akeyulerre Healing Centre*

Akeyulerre is a cultural healing centre for all Arrernte families, based in Alice Springs. It's about acknowledging traditional storytelling, songs and dance. For many of our people the traditional language and culture from generations to generations are slowly fading away but the healing centre is a place where they still have ties to all of those traditional knowledges. Among all of the social events happening in and around town with alcohol issues, drugs and other social issues the healing centre is the only place for all Arrernte people trying to make family strong in culture. The only way the healing centre could make things work is to work inside families and across all generations and across different families too. Akeyulerre is not a 'service'—it doesn't provide services but it helps people connect to language, culture and country and that is what makes the healing centre so powerful and strong. The healing centre is really important because unless we protect and support those systems of knowledge many young Aboriginal people won't grow up to be proud and strong.

### **Background**

#### *Tangentyere Research*

The Tangentyere Researchers are made up of town camp residents that live on the town camps of Alice Springs, but we do not have any academic qualifications like any western academic researchers. The only qualifications that we have are our knowledge and understanding of our people, language and culture. For many research projects that we have done with Aboriginal people on town camps our local knowledge plays a big part for us and for them because what we have earned from our people is the trust and respect and we have our ethics and rules. Confidentiality is understood. The way that Tangentyere Research conduct their research is as follows. Before we go out we have a workshop and in that workshop we design our own information and consent form, we design the survey tools, we analyse and enter the data. In that way we have ownership of the data.

For any research that others want us to do that is related to Aboriginal people living on town camps this process must be followed to ensure that we are involved with the decision-making. The idea for project is written to us from non-government and government agencies. We then refer to the Tangentyere Research Hub or the Research Advisory Committee. The Research Advisory Committee can approve projects or they can refer to the full Tangentyere Executive for full support of a project.

Once a project is referred to the full Executive committee they can approve the project to commence by the Tangentyere Researchers. If a project is not approved they invite the representatives to attend the next Executive meeting to present the project. That way the Executive can ask the representatives any questions they like. These steps are taken to make sure that appropriate research is done to benefit Aboriginal people on town camps.

#### *Charles Darwin University*

Charles Darwin University is a dual sector university (including higher education and vocational training), which specialises in producing graduates suited for the Northern Territory context. Located as it is, in a context where 30 per cent of the population is Indigenous, SPiL is particularly cognisant of the importance of engaging appropriately with those who have a different cultural frame of reference—many of who speak languages other than English as their first and second language (Campbell and Christie 2009). Appropriate engagement in this

context means respecting culture and language and providing a way for the local community to participate as partners in the evaluation process.

### **The purpose of evaluation**

Before we go on to discuss the outcomes of the CDU-Tangentyere partnership, it may be important for the reader to understand what we understand evaluation to be. While this review of relevant literature is presented from an academic western frame of reference it demonstrates that evaluation is not as simple as it is perhaps perceived to be. Nor, for that matter are the concepts of collaboration and partnership, which are also discussed.

At one level evaluations are used for assessing program outcomes, typically using program logic models to determine: success of interventions (Patton 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004); 'effectiveness and efficiency' (Stevens 2005); and what works and why, to inform the formative development of policy and practice (Dawe 2003). While the evaluators themselves may have a role in designing the method of an evaluation, to a large degree the purpose of any evaluation is determined more by the commissioning organisation than by any single methodological approach (Chelimsky 2007). In the case of internal evaluations, where the purpose of evaluation may be driven by an organisation's need to improve professional practice or quality a 'community of practice' approach may be warranted (Wenger 1998). In the case of this latter purpose, the 'community' itself determines the purpose. Such evaluations could also be described as participatory, where 'diverse stakeholders—most importantly, stakeholders from the least powerful groups—collaborate as co-evaluators in evaluation, often as members of an evaluation team' (Greene 2006:125). Proponents of 'empowerment evaluations' (e.g. Fetterman and Wandersman 2005; 2007) take this a step further, arguing that such evaluations are not just participatory but can be used to 'foster improvement and self-determination' (Fetterman 2005:10).

### *Evaluation approaches*

Evaluations can be seen to be either formative or summative. Formative evaluations tend to work alongside a program without necessarily having specific outcomes in mind. They can be used to help an organisation to determine the kind of outcomes that may be desirable. Summative evaluations on the other hand, tend to be backward looking reflecting on what has taken place, reporting on outcomes and results of the program without necessarily having input into the future direction of the program (see Mark et al. 2006; Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007). The evaluation that formed the basis of this paper was largely—though not exclusively—formative. Questions posed by the evaluation were directed toward learning and improvement (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). The evaluation questions posed in the evaluation plan reflected a predominantly formative agenda.

### *The need for collaborative partnerships in evaluation*

Collaboration is the act of working jointly—a joint effort of multiple individuals or work groups to accomplish a task or project (Guenther and Millar 2007). The term is often associated with 'alliances' and 'coalitions' (Huxham and Vangen 2000; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001). In human services it is the effort made together by two or more agencies or service providers in order to better serve their participants and achieve results they cannot achieve working alone. A useful definition draws together the ideas of mutual benefit, relationship and shared goals:

*Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals. (Mattessich et al. 2004:4)*

There are multiple reasons for collaboration in evaluation. They include: increasing acceptance of evaluation findings and increasing participation in and ownership of the evaluation; improving communication and problem solving; and increasing capacity among stakeholders (Harper et al. 2003; Cousins and Shulha 2006). Further, in 'the *process* of participating in an evaluation, participants are exposed to and have the opportunity to learn the logic of evaluation and the discipline of evaluation reasoning' (Patton 2008:172).

In terms of benefits of collaboration to research in Indigenous contexts a number of points are raised. For example, such research builds capacity to provide stronger, more effective research in such contexts. It builds the capacity of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. In a relationship such as that developed for the Akeyulerre evaluation there was a range of learnings that took place. The non-Aboriginal researchers were continually reminded of/taught cultural aspects of the healing centre's operation, they were supported to better engage with the healing centre, and they had Indigenous team members to ask questions of and so ensure better understanding and fewer mistakes in the data gathering and analysis phases. On the other hand the Aboriginal researchers were supported in their approach to the western aspects of the project. As there was to be both a community report and a report for Government the development of the latter relied to some degree initially on the non-Aboriginal researchers.

### **What brought us together**

#### *Charles Darwin University*

Initial discussions regarding the Akeyulerre healing centre evaluation alerted the CDU team to the fact that joining with the Tangentyere Research Group was a possibility. This was viewed as a very positive aspect of the project. SPiL has a policy of engagement and partnership development with its clients and where possible the participants of research. As many of the researchers within SPiL are either Indigenous or have extensive experience working alongside Indigenous people they are aware of the need to work closely and in a participative way with Indigenous communities of interest. With the Akeyulerre project one of the first reasons that prompted us to ask Tangentyere Research to join with us was because we felt that we were unable to effectively bring together the evidence required to reflect the Arrernte perspective. We did not have the local and cultural knowledge or language skills that were required.

#### *Tangentyere Research*

We the Tangentyere researchers were approached by the CDU academic researchers to evaluate the Akeyulerre Healing Centre. Tangentyere Research has been operating since 2002 and has been doing various research projects for government departments. Through our knowledge and expertise they were seeking to work with Aboriginal researchers. First we met up with each other and to introduce and get to know each other. We worked out what role the Aboriginal researchers had to play alongside the CDU researchers. We worked out what research had to be done and how the research had to be conducted in an appropriate manner within our environment and how to respect the language and culture of the Arrernte people.

#### *Why was there a need to have local Aboriginal input*

While the CDU team included a respected Aboriginal researcher it is a mistake to believe that an Aboriginal person can necessarily understand and speak for other Aboriginal groups. At best, such an approach may reach somewhat to better data. At worst it can be tokenistic and place a great deal of stress on that researcher. Local people with understanding of the cultural, language, political and social contexts are far better situated to gather more informed data.

There is a need for Aboriginal researchers because they have the knowledge and understanding of their people's language and cultures. They can speak and understand many languages, but the main language spoken in Alice Springs is Arrernte. For many Aboriginal people that come in from the different communities the first language they speak in Alice Springs is Arrernte and then their own and then English. Why? Because Alice Springs is Arrernte Country. So when conducting research on Aboriginal country it is vital to have respect for language speakers who are there to translate and to interpret for any western researchers and to capture the true stories from Aboriginal people. Because too many times Aboriginal people have been researched on and too many times it did not benefit the Aboriginal people's living conditions. All research was used for the benefit of academics and Aboriginal people were not involved like they are today. There has been a lot of research that's been done on Aboriginal people in the past and their knowledge was taken away to be used for people to get qualifications, not for the benefit of Aboriginal people themselves.

And they are riding high on Aboriginal knowledge. But when our people see one of their own kind doing research they are happy because they know that they will be acknowledged and their voices will be heard and Aboriginal people will benefit from it. What the Tangentyere Researchers have learned while doing research is that to do research with Aboriginal people is to a) respect them before they respect you; and b) trust them before they trust you.

It is important that we conduct our own research because:

- It's asking the right question to the right person by the right person;
- When it is OK to ask, information can be kept safe and used properly;
- We learn new skills, provide information, and become strong with knowledge; and
- It is a process for us; it was finding answers to questions.

We are using our own research to provide a better understanding for non-government and government agencies about why it is appropriate for us to do our own research. We have the language skills, the respect and knowledge of interpretation. We know our social issues, our people, our culture, and our language. We are not just interpreters, we have strong rules (ethics). Consent and confidentiality is understood.

When doing research in or on Aboriginal land you have to find out when it is appropriate to go and do the research with Aboriginal people. Time is a really big factor because Aboriginal people don't always meet you on time. They're always mobile. Mobility plays a big part too whether it be ceremonial business or sorry business or other issues, Aboriginal people are always moving from place to place.

### **Partnership relationship**

The partnership relationship was beneficial to both CDU and Tangentyere Research. Over time we learned how to work together.

#### *Benefits to CDU*

From the CDU perspective, the benefits of this partnership relationship are multiple. Firstly and primarily, the relationship allowed for the evaluation to proceed with greater integrity than it otherwise would have. The existing relationships that Tangentyere has with the local community—in particular the Arrernte community—was critical to effective data collection from a service use perspective. The depth and quality of data that the Tangentyere team members were able to collect was invaluable. Further, the perspectives brought to the evaluation by the Tangentyere team added significantly to the analysis and synthesis of the data collected by both teams.

One of the other benefits for CDU arises from the potential of being able to work together on new projects in the future. The partnership—now that there is trust between the teams—offers new ways of working effectively on projects that connect with the local Aboriginal community.

#### *Benefits to Tangentyere*

We as Tangentyere researchers have the benefit of gaining experience and knowledge from the western academic side and to speak up for Aboriginal people. The benefits for our researchers are the opportunity of working in partnership alongside qualified western academic researchers, and the results we get out of the research. The benefit for the Tangentyere Aboriginal researchers is by working with other academic researchers we can get more recognition for who we are (local Aboriginal people); and how we do it (our way, our values)—they work with us not against us. We can make changes and help make better policies for our people. In this way the research benefits the community as well. Trust and respect are important in this process.

#### *How we learned to work together*

From the CDU perspective, there was a considerable gestation period in the relationship. That is, before we felt comfortable working with the Tangentyere team there needed to be opportunities for relationship building, learning from each other, trust building, and developing a shared understanding of the purpose that brought us together. This process took several months to go through and from a practical point of view, involved joining together in several workshops and meetings to share ideas about data collection, methodologies, report writing, and understanding the local context. The time required to nurture this relationship was relatively costly—in the sense that it may have delayed commencement of data collection—but we recognised that without the mutual trust and a shared sense of ownership in this project the data collection process could have been jeopardised. There was simply no point in ploughing ahead with data collection without a vehicle for meaningful participation and engagement.

For CDU, working together means a number of things. It firstly means accepting the values and cultural norms of our partners without prejudice. While we bring our own academic ways of doing things, it sometimes means letting go of those ways—along with the constraints imposed by academia—in such a way as to allow for a full and free exchange of ideas. It means valuing the knowledge, skills and experience of our partners and being prepared to learn from that. It also means being prepared to bring our own sets of knowledge and skills to the partnership in such a way that builds our partner's capacity. In practical terms it means being willing to share the responsibilities and tasks associated with a project from planning, evaluation design, data collection, analysis, reporting through to dissemination.

From the Tangentyere researchers point of view we were shocked to see people waiting to meet us. We did not know who they were and where they were from. We did not know if we could trust them and we were wary to give out our information. For as researchers we wanted to protect our evidence of information because a lot of research has been misinterpreted and was used the wrong way. It was confusing at first and a bit scary but we kept on having meetings and workshops and meeting up as often as we could to build our confidence and slowly the process of learning from each other and building our trust and respect was taking place. It took us the Tangentyere researchers and the CDU researchers a while before our confidence of working together with each other built up and it took us a while to get to know each other but it was worth it.

## **Pulling the threads together**

There are a number of learnings that arose for us as we reflected on our work together. These are summarised briefly in the sections that follow.

### *Relationship development takes time*

Relationship development cannot be rushed. It takes time and one of the issues is the need for project funders to recognise this. Every new project requires a different approach. It requires time for preparation. You can't compare the new research with the old research. Nor can it be assumed that the way it worked before will be the way it works next time.

You have to start by telling who you are and where you are from. You can't expect to ride on our backs. You have to teach those coming in what the process is for the research or evaluation. You can't take shortcuts. Information gathered has to be shared. This takes time.

Western academic researchers often develop an agenda that is built around western ways of working and western time frames. These timeframes usually do not fit Aboriginal ways. Therefore when an evaluation is being planned, at the outset it is almost necessary for western evaluators to double the amount of time required for what they want to achieve or alternatively (and perhaps better still) listen to what Aboriginal researchers and local stakeholders say is achievable in a given timeframe.

### *Community ownership of research*

It is important for local researchers to maintain control. It is also important to make sure that research is given back to the community. Knowledge shouldn't be taken away (in order to write a report)—then it just feels like you have been ripped off. Permission for the use of material is important. There must be a point where the report goes back to the community to benefit the community.

### *Partnership means...*

Partnerships means several things in this context. It means sharing power, listening, giving way, listening, sharing the ups and downs, validating ideas, listening, seeking not assuming, finding humour instead of embarrassment or blame, listening, moving at the pace of the group, and providing ideas and direction (Yes, that's listening four times!). It means sharing knowledge, learning processes, getting to know the person who comes in to the project. A partnership is a reciprocal relationship where both sides get something from the relationship, not just one. There has to be a level of agreement between the two groups.

### *Living with uncertainty*

For western researchers and evaluators living with uncertainties can create a degree of anxiety, particularly as deadlines loom close and resources disappear. There is a sense in which the unexpected is to be expected. This takes some getting used to for westerners who like to plan everything. However, once this uncertainty is taken as a given and accepted it is possible to enjoy the process and learn from it. The focus changes from meeting deadlines to enjoying getting to know one another.

### *Trust and respect*

It can be scary at the start getting to know each other. We ask ourselves: will it fit with how we work and what our expectations are? But as we get to know each other we can then see how our work can come together. Trust and respect for each other build up over time. As part of this process it is important to acknowledge the work that we all contribute to the project.

### *Sharing tasks*

We have learned that not everyone has to do everything. It is, at best, a merging of skills and knowledge. We recognise our collective strengths and accept that tasks can be shared. Not everyone has to do writing for example but you use the skills you have for the benefit of the project. In this way the evaluation becomes a rewarding project. The skills and knowledge that are shared are beneficial to all involved, and in turn benefit the program being evaluated.

### **Conclusions**

The evaluation on which this paper was based was a collaborative exercise that drew on the shared knowledge and skills of both the Charles Darwin University and Tangentyere Research teams. The outcomes of the evaluation are not important for the purposes of this paper. However, the outcomes of the partnership are very important, particularly in terms of the learnings they bring to universities wanting to engage with local Aboriginal organisations in research and evaluation projects. These outcomes could be expressed in terms of shared understandings, increased research capacity, community benefit and improved data quality.

While the outcomes may have been worthwhile to both CDU and Tangentyere Research, the process of working together was perhaps even more valuable than the outcomes. We were able to work together constructively and productively. The CDU team were able to put aside their anxieties about time and both groups learned to trust and respect each other—we were able to achieve the required outputs on time. We drew on each others' strengths, skills and knowledges—western and Aboriginal.

We decided to write this paper together so that we could share some of our learnings with others who may want to work in partnership with Aboriginal people on research and evaluation projects. We have seen others try to do research with Aboriginal people and fall into the trap of assuming that their knowledge is better than the others and their way of doing things is better. While not wanting to suggest that this has been easy, our work together has been a richly rewarding process as we have brought two knowledges together.

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