

Art has a Place: Country as a teacher in the city

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ABSTRACT

Country constitutes the very anchor of life for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. It is central to Indigenous identities and history, and is a powerful signifier of overall health and well-being; yet, the significance of country to Indigenous people living in large urban localities such as Sydney, Australia, remains an enigma. Through the production of a series of three murals on a university campus, this project was designed to explore the significance of country for three Darug artists working alongside 90 pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education. The authors were working with the notion that Aboriginal art comes from country and should stay on country; hence, the painting was directed by Darug artists because we were teaching and learning on Darug country. Our objective, though, was to explore through practice how country teaches in the city, and to produce new stories of coexistence. Narratives developed around terms of engagement and the relationships that developed through project partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal, country, urban, arts education, pre-service teacher education

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Stories of the City

When school children think of Aboriginal people, their minds usually default to the north of Australia; Aboriginal people are black and live in the Northern Territory (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). Yet, over 9% (52,171) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia live in the Sydney region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), while 24% (10,409) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in NSW are enrolled in Sydney public schools (NSW Department of Education & Communities, 2012). Stories of Aboriginal absence and authenticity in the city are tied to assumptions that ‘real Aboriginals live in the bush’, while those in the city have been absorbed into the wider community (Fredericks, 2013).

The dominance of colonial power relations in urban locations such as Sydney is maintained by those schools and universities through their own processes of teaching and learning. The new Australian curriculum (ACARA, 2014) supports the conception that Aboriginal people live in the bush through the presentation of exemplars for teachers. So-called elaborations of how teachers can implement key concepts from the new Geography syllabus focus on Indigenous people living in rural and remote locations, while similar elaborations of life in the city are largely absent.

All teachers across Australia from Kindergarten to Year 10 are required to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in their teaching and so it is understandable that pre-service teachers are often overwhelmed by stories of absence and authenticity, stories that are themselves confused by changes in the social and historical landscapes of Australia. Stories of absence are further reinforced in the higher education context, where despite the best policy

intentions to systemically embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum by organisations such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC, 2015) and Universities Australia (2012), such initiatives ‘remain a challenging political, social and practical task, and have even prompted negative media coverage’ (Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power, & Sunderland, 2014, p. 3). Nakata (2013) notes some of the difficulties associated with these changes when he asks who is in a position to judge what constitutes ‘authentic’ Indigenous identity in the context of Australia’s historical experiences, the intergenerational mixing of heritages and the social and geographical mobility of younger generations. He adds that unless individuals have a historical narrative to tell and an acceptable familial profile in the community, they are at risk of being judged as inauthentic.

Both Fredericks (2013) and Moreton-Robinson (2011) call for a reframing of Aboriginality within discourses that account for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban locations. They argue that such a reconceptualisation must begin to focus on the local significance of country to Aboriginal people living in discreet and specific locations across the nation.

We searched for a new approach to teach about Aboriginal Sydney that would make a difference, and shift the focus away from cognition and onto modelling a practice of engagement for students. To this end, the project required pre-service teachers, artists and university administration to work alongside one another to produce new methods of reflecting on the conflicted historical relationship that constitutes an underbelly of social life in Sydney. The negotiated production of the three murals allowed students to experience, through stories and resources, how three Darug artists positioned themselves on country through their art.

New stories need to be told in the city. Somerville (2013, p. 12) argues that ‘changing our relationship to place means changing the stories we tell’. Such stories of Sydney need to account for the diversity of Aboriginal people, and the histories and cultures of the region. And importantly, they need to allow for changes of the kind identified by Nakata (2013) above in order to account for the continued colonial domination of the space that is now Sydney, for the intergenerational mixing of heritages and the social and geographical mobility of younger generations.

This paper has three aims. Firstly, it demonstrates how the significance of country to Aboriginal people living in the city can be incorporated in a teacher education programme. Through an interview with Darug artist, Leanne Tobin, it documents how country teaches both herself and a large group of pre-service teachers in the city. This exploration is conducted in the context of the call from Fredericks (2013) and Moreton-Robinson (2011) to reconceptualise Aboriginality in the city. We wanted to establish some possibilities for reflecting on stories of Aboriginal absence and authenticity that dominate the discursive space of Sydney. Secondly, we attempt to demonstrate how country can be taught in the city when university students and Aboriginal artists work alongside one another *on country*. The third section explicates how country teaches, with the aim of developing a pedagogy that can assist students to understand Indigenous perspectives on urban landscapes. It draws on the international work of Jane Bennett, along with Australian research based on Bawaka country (2014) to identify how light, wind and water inevitably engage participants on country, on a university campus in Sydney, Australia. The concept of *country* is a term derived from Aboriginal English in Australia, and refers to a specific clan, tribal group or nation of Aboriginal people, and includes the knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that homeland (Fredericks, 2013, p. 6). Country is what connects people, animals, plants, water and land to each other (Bawaka country including Suchet-Pearson, Wright, Lloyd, and Burarrwanga (2013).

The Learning Context

As part of a community arts project at a university in Sydney, a small family of Darug artists worked alongside 90 teacher education students enrolled in an Aboriginal education unit to explore the implications of including Aboriginal art in the curricula. In establishing the project, we aimed to

avoid one of the ongoing problems of the curriculum where Australian students sit in classrooms talking *about* Aboriginal art and *about* Aboriginal histories and cultures.

The focus was to encourage students to talk about their experiences of working alongside Aboriginal artists, and to engage with Aboriginal people and to be 'responsive to country' (Somerville, 2013) through the use of creative and imaginative resources. The objective was to locate Aboriginal art on-country, and to demonstrate that art comes from country, and should stay on country.

The project was first discussed two years ago as part of our curriculum planning for a unit based in Aboriginal Education in the School of Education at Macquarie University, Sydney. We wanted to include a component on Aboriginal art in the course because we knew that many students who were training to be teachers had stereotypical conceptions of Aboriginal art, such as cross-hatching, and circles and dots in the sand. The common perception was that Aboriginal art comes from Arnhemland and Alice!

We wanted students to learn about Aboriginal art, and so our thoughts focused on two key issues. The first focused on developing a pedagogy that would not perpetuate well-worn stereotypes *about* Aboriginal art, and the other attempted to second-guess students who perceive education as essentially a process of correcting beliefs and attitudes (to be more consistent with those of the teacher). Our solution was to locate Aboriginal art on-country, and to demonstrate that art comes from country. We were in Sydney, learning on Darug country. Our objective was to work with local Darug artists to *do* art, rather than learn *about* it.

We sought the assistance of previous models of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together on country *in the city* to guide us into the project, and in doing so, we reviewed research conducted in human geography as well as in the field of higher education. In an Australian Learning and Teaching Council renewal project that examines current teaching and learning practice in Indigenous Australian studies, Mackinlay and Barney (2012) take a closer look at the colonial domination of space through their method of PEARL. PEARL is used to describe the Political, Embodied, Active and Reflective aspects of this teaching and learning approach by enabling:

teachers and learners to consider the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies are represented, sidelined and/or excluded across disciplines. It interrogates the ideologies that make such inequities possible, and to deconstruct unequal relations of power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the past and present. (Mackinlay & Barney, 2012, p. 14)

Bartleet, et al. (2014, p. 3) argue that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum has often been presented in an abstract manner that is removed from the lived experience of Indigenous people. In the context of teaching in higher education, Mackinlay and Dunbar-Hall (2003) note how in-class learning experiences can lack the intercultural relationships required to promote reconciliation and deeper understandings of Indigenous ways of seeing and being.

Bartleet et al. (2014) draw on the concepts of *respect*, *reciprocity*, *relevance* and *reflection* to position arts-based service learning (ABSL) as a strategy through which Australian higher education institutions can promote Indigenous cultural content for all students in ways that directly support Indigenous communities. They argue that 'the arts foster interpersonal expression and empathy...and non- or extra-linguistic intercultural communication' in ways that cognitive-based learning cannot in university contexts. Arts-based knowing lies beyond language, as something that can be 'painted, sculpted, danced, or sensed in and through music, moving images, architecture and poetry' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 157).

Power and Bennett (2015, p. 159) also draw upon ABSL to position service learning as a strategy through which Australian higher education institutions can promote Australian Aboriginal cultural content for all tertiary students. Like PEAL, ABSL provides a culturally sensitive and enabling process for embedding Indigenous content. The research of Power and Bennett (2015) draws on the

theoretical frameworks of a/r/tography, ABSL and place pedagogy to privilege *openness, listening and being receptive to the other* (Todd, 2003). They found that ABSL facilitated empathy, along with opportunities for students 'to be mindful and to inquire into spiritual values of silence, stillness, and space' (Power & Bennett, 2015, p. 165). Drawing on the work of Ellsworth (2005) and Rose (2013), they conclude:

At times, the spaces between art-making, teaching, and research existed as stillness and silence. Within these spaces, pre-service teachers found a content that offered new ways of understanding and being.

Power and Bennett (2015) interpret these new methods of understanding in terms of sensation and aesthetic experience: 'aesthetic experience holds the potential for the coming of a knowing, available only through acknowledgement and inaccessible through explanation' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 158).

The Significance of Country in the City

Exemplars of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together on country abound in the context of remote and rural spaces, including an exceptionally innovative and creative research project grounded in a relationship between Bawaka country in Arnhemland, the Yolngu (Aboriginal) living there and Balanda (white) university researchers. Burarrwanga et al. (2013) narrate the stories of their learning from country, but importantly, they document an evolving methodology generated through an increasingly complex relationship that develops as the researchers return annually to Bawaka to develop their learning from country (also see Wright et al., 2011). Readers in turn witness the development of a cross-cultural partnership, negotiated over many years of discussion and narrated through country as well as by humans. Daniels and Lorimer (2012) explain how country does indeed have the power to tell stories, and in the case of Bawaka country, those stories are told through the messages of the sea-son, winds, tides, fish, moon and so forth that are sent to us (Bawaka country et al., 2014). Bawaka country becomes a research partner and teacher of both the Yolngu and Balanda people involved.

Daniels and Lorimer (2012) explore the nature and value of narrative as a form of interpretation. They argue that narrative can be a creative method as well as a generator of questions, and in the context of its performativity, narrative is able to produce the outcome (in this case a mural) as well as constituting the medium. They conclude that narrative is 'at once a doing and the thing done'. In the case of the research on Bawaka country (Bawaka, 2013, 2014; Burarrwanga et al., 2013), it is the ongoing narrative of the developing relation of Yolngu and university researchers to country that generates methodology. Their methodology is both the means and their product.

Yet, the narratives of country in remote localities (Zurba & Berkes, 2014; Gibson, 2012; Rose, 2011, 1996) are not narratives of the city, and are far removed from large urban localities such as Sydney. It is possible, nevertheless, to piece together a small number of disparate studies that focus more generally on Sydney as a region (Connell, 2000) and more specifically on the suburb of Redfern in Sydney, for example, Aboriginal youth sub-cultures in Redfern (Morgan, 2012) and theorisations of 'living black' (Shaw, 2013).

However, only a small proportion of Aboriginal people in Sydney reside in Redfern, while the voices of others remain largely unheard. The work of James Kohen (2010) constitutes one of the exceptions to the ongoing colonial obsession with inner suburban Redfern; he has endeavoured to identify the lives and interests of Darug people in its various facets over the last 25 years. Meanwhile, Everett (2011) has attempted to document the political boundaries around the various community groups living on Darug country. In a micro-ethnographic study of the life of one Aboriginal man living in the outer suburbs of Sydney, the highly regarded anthropologist, Gillian Cowlshaw (2009) documents the minutiae of a dislocated life for the man who has moved from western New South

Wales to Sydney. This project, though, focuses on the significance of country for local Darug people, and how that can be incorporated in a university teaching programme.

The Country

Macquarie University sits on Darug country in Sydney. Darug are one of five Aboriginal groups of the Sydney basin, and their country extends from the city to the Blue Mountains in the west. Darug country is encompassed by rivers in the north and south of the basin, and the people were one of the first Aboriginal groups to experience the full impact of the British invasion in 1788 when the first fleet arrived and stayed. There are now many Darug claiming cultural heritage after years of rejection and being 'accused of concocting a fraudulent act' (Nakata, 2013, 128). The ways in which a small group of Darug artists regenerate and revitalise their own links to country constitute an ongoing thread for this project.

Macquarie University is a relatively new university, and has developed a strong relationship with Sydney's business community and that is immediately obvious to any campus visitor, though only in recent times has it begun to recognise its Aboriginal heritage and its links to Darug country (see Macquarie University, 2014; Harrison, 2014). We therefore aimed to make that Aboriginal presence on campus more explicit.

Ethics clearance for the project was gained through Macquarie University (5201200750). The people named in this project have consented to have their actual names used, and Leanne Tobin, the artist is of course an author of the paper.

The Project

In 2011, we began negotiations with renowned Darug artist, Leanne Tobin to discuss how we might meaningfully engage Macquarie students in Aboriginal art on Darug country. We wanted to avoid transmission-based models of education where students gather in classrooms to talk *about* generalised forms of Aboriginal art, without ever learning a style from country. How could Aboriginal art be taught without recreating the stereotypes of *dots in the desert* and *cross-hatching* from Arnhemland?

Leanne Tobin offered to join our team to plan and create three murals on the university campus. At the beginning of a series of three workshops, Leanne's brother, Chris, explained to students how the main mural (see Figure 1) would tell an old Darug story about the creation of the coves and inlets of Port Jackson.

He said that students were working on the country of the Wallumedjgal, the Snap- per fish people, a saltwater clan of the Darug who live around the northern waterways of the Parramatta River and Sydney harbour. The photo of the main mural (Figure 1) shows the meeting of fresh and saltwater along the Parramatta River, while the flora and fauna represent the totems of various clans living along the length of the river from the heads of Port Jackson in the morning to the upper reaches of the river at night. The shark and stingray represented at the entrance to the harbour are of special significance to the creation of the landscape of the region. Chris highlighted how, long



Figure 1. Part of one mural showing Port Jackson and the entrance to Parramatta River.

ago the shark and stingray engaged in battle and as they did so, they gouged out the bays and inlets of Port Jackson.

As students painted, they were told about the country upon which they were learning, the people and kinship networks and the plants and animals that inhabit all the places on that country. Smith (2002, p. 594) notes that 'the primary value of place-based education lies in the way that it serves to strengthen students' connections to others and to the regions in which they live'. One of the students working on the mural remarked how their painting engaged other students, not just the ones in the unit. Other students from the university would pass by (the main mural is located on the university thoroughfare) and ask questions about what they were painting and its purpose.

Chris talked of a mutual engagement that has constantly taken place along the river for thousands of years, and now humans are included in that growing historical and geographical complexities. Places along the river work together to influence flora and fauna that live in other locations (Israel, 2012). He told the story of the annual migration of eels from far out to sea, and up the river to a suburban site that is now named Parramatta, a term derived from a Darug word, *Burrumatta*, meaning place of eels. While he talked of past in the present, he also expressed the common engagement of Darug and English, and the sense of common existence that both maintain through place, and through the rugby league football club, Parramatta, also nicknamed the *Parramatta Eels* that is based there. Meanwhile, Leanne returned a number of times to Latour's (2004) notion of how humans learn to be *affected* by place, and this will be explored in the following section on how country teaches.

As students worked in groups of 30 alongside Leanne and her family over a number of weeks, they were learning the special stories of country. And they were certainly learning the particular techniques of a mural painter. But more importantly, they were communicating with three Aboriginal people about artistic styles on country, and their own role in the production of the murals. They were negotiating outcomes with a person of authority, and listening to the exchanges between Leanne, her brother and son. The books and lectures were set aside for a short period in order that they could learn. The endless theorising of human relationships and reconciliation that occurs in most classrooms had been replaced by the direct experience of university student and Darug artist working alongside one another to create the three murals. There was a growing sense of what Somerville (2013) terms *mutual entanglement* as students, artists and university administration negotiated outcomes for the project.

How does Country Teach in the City?

In a chapter on learning place in the primary school, Somerville (2011) seeks to understand the positive identity-shaping possibilities for children learning place through interactions between a group of school children, the local river wetlands and the power company. In asking the question, *How is place pedagogical?*, she finds that place 'illuminates the ways in which a specific site can make available complex learnings of place' (2011, p. 77). Place-based learning is created through the children's physical, cognitive, emotional or spiritual interactions with place.

In *Water in a dry land*, Somerville (2013) travels across the Murray-Darling Basin of western NSW to note initially that the *mutual entanglement* of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is fundamental to her research. There is always a sense of cultural exchange when people come together to share a space, and even story. This sense of inevitable cultural exchange was explicated in Marcia Langton's earlier work (1993) on how discourse between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is always intersubjective insofar as the speaker in a linguistic exchange constitutes what is said for the other's desire. It thus becomes impossible to identify the origins and owners of any particular discourse, when thoughts and subjectivities are mutually entangled.

When students first started painting the mural, the individual marks were obvious. Students had their physical place on the mural site, they returned to the same spot each week, and they added

their marks over the time that they worked there. The longer they painted, the more intertwined both the mural and the painters became; so, that the final product was a mutually negotiated one where individual contributions could not be deciphered, and the painters too became mutually entangled with unexpected neighbours as they met each other often for the first time and shared stories about their own lives, and anxieties about university study. The constitution of place through the murals created the chance for students to meet the unexpected and to be moved by the unexpected. Place constituted the question of our coexistence on country that has been shared, albeit unequally for 230 years in Sydney. Leanne demonstrates a coexistence between human and non-human:

it's been a real learning process ... from being in country ... looking every- where observing different things and changes I can see birds and I think oh there's a little Eastern Yellow Robin and I know because I saw his nest just down there before and I saw them when there were eggs in that nest and when they became chicks. You know little chicks sitting in that nest. So all of those connections, there he is there (pointing).

Leanne is clearly *affected* by place through the connections she observes, as well as by her own position in the cycle of life. Is she sitting back, looking from a distance? Let's see.

Latour (2004) describes the affectation as 'moved, put into motion by other entities human or non-human'. Learning to be affected is to be engaged by more and more elements. It is learning to be affected by the differences and multiplicities of the country around us. Leanne explains the depth of that affectation through her *life-long learning* from country:

I think the biggest lesson I've had [from country] is to keep a very open mind and always, always be aware that you're still a learner. You've never ever got it all and that way it's kept me open to learning from lots of different people and a lot of the time from being in country, near country, walking around with your feet on the ground with your eyes looking everywhere observing different things and changes. When you start, it's addictive too, the more you look the more you see, the more you want to know ...

Country is not teaching Leanne through formal instruction, or even orally. There is no position of authority, and certainly no place for transmission-based theories of learning. Country is a teacher, where the student learns through *indicators*:

Indicator plants signify the beginning of different seasons. I notice that now, right now, we've got a lot of Yellow Box blossoms. When you are coming up the freeway, you see them in September, they are just big white blossoms on the tree. That's the Yellow Box Gum. It flowers the same time every year. You've got the Turpentine blossoms out there as well. The Turpentine Trees are flowering at this time as well. So those sort of things your notice more.

Indicators are plants, flowers and animals. Indicators are also wind and water. In working outside, students and artists were interrupted and unsettled by the dust and rubbish kicked up by the blustery winds late one afternoon while painting; they were affected by the changing light, and the emerging darkness, by the evening cool on their skin. Their eyes, their nose and their skin were affected by the place in which they were working; their space was no longer moderated and conditioned by machines. Meanwhile, they were responsive to the many who were passing by and stopped to ask about what they were doing. How rare it is for a university student to pop into one of my classes and ask other students what they were doing! Selves—and stories—were becoming affected by country. Students and artists were talking together on country, and everyone was affected in some way. They were learning from indicators about relations on country in the city.

In the academy, we focus on what Bennett (2010, p. 116) describes as 'disentangling the human from the non-human'. One of our primary research functions is to demonstrate that the object remains true to itself and has not been contaminated by human observation. The data and the interpretation must be seen to be separate (Harrison, 2004). Simultaneously, humans are increasingly withdrawing from nature (Greenwood, 2009), moving further into an ontological field that can think its way out of problems and intervene to save the world from ecological catastrophe

(Guattari, 2000). Bennett (2010) questions those endeavours to distinguish the human from the field. This is evident in teacher education in Australia where there is an ongoing desire to provide student teachers with human agency and the skills to think about problems and to apply solutions to unknown contexts. The profession is led by the desire to 'make a difference' in education, but in wanting to produce that difference, teachers inevitably occupy distance as they engage in what Bennett (2010, 122) describes as 'the fantasies of human mastery'.

Learning a metalanguage is paramount to student success; successful students at school must learn to talk and write *about* the field from a distance. This project, however, began in searching for an alternative method of learning and teaching at university where distance could be removed from the relation between humans and Aboriginal art. The proposition in this paper has been that country (and the non-human) can help us achieve that aim. It is in this context that Bennett (2010, p. 111) asks, How do we attend to the non-human? What is the not-quite-human in human? (Bennett, 2010, p. 118). I have suggested that human and non-human are already affecting one another. But do students need to know that through a metalanguage?

Donald (1999) pursues questions around our *being together* in the modern western city in the context of an inevitability of conflict. That conflict has overwhelmed the historical and geographical landscapes of Sydney to the point where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations have perhaps moved further apart since 1788. Donald focuses on the complex negotiations of how we can live together in enormous cities such as Paris and London. Meanwhile, Robins (1997) argues for a change in the way we live in the city, rather than a change in the city. This point brings Hinchliffe, Kearnes, Degen and Whatmore (2005) to posit more of an ontological shift rather than an epistemological change. The successful approach to research adopted on Bawaka country (2014) described above was governed by an ontological shift in the anthropocentric domination of pedagogy, where country is accepted to be a teacher. Humans (including teachers and students) are not central to teaching and learning on Bawaka country.

Our focus was not to change opinions and attitudes, and we did not set out to give students more accurate representations of Aboriginal art or even of Aboriginal people. Nor did we endeavour to make students conscious of what they did not know. The project was about sponsoring engagements between local Darug artists and university students on country in Sydney so that students could be 'moved'. In a place where everyone is thrown together, often with unexpected neighbours, it was about demonstrating other ways in which pre-service teachers could learn to be affected by others, and even to be good representatives of Aboriginal people.

The objective was to develop other ontological methods which had the capacity to tell stories of 'coexistence' (Latour, 1999) on country, in a place where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have been immersed in a cycle of relations for over 230 years.

In an interview with Leanne about what country means to her as a Darug woman living on country, she talked about the connections between flora and fauna (including herself), affects of the seasons and weather, the damage executed to country when humans defile it with pollutants and insecticides. But in particular, she outlined her knowledge of connections which help her understand the importance of caring for country:

When you start to see the connections animals and plants have to each other, you know, it is very much, we're part of that cycle, we're part of that whole thing and we're not above it. We're not observers watching it we are actually immersed in it and are part of it and we need to be aware of that so we can take care of it.

We are unavoidably immersed in the life of country. Leanne focuses on a crucial relation between human and non-human to emphasise that it is not a question of outside and inside, but one of reciprocity and coexistence on country. That is important in the Sydney context because of our historical and geographical relations. We need new stories of common existence that have been produced together on country and focus on the constitution of knowledge of country in the city

through mutual engagement and connection. We need these new stories in order to produce historical and geographical connections in a city otherwise moribund by memories of conflict and disempowerment.

Greenwood (2009, p. 5) argues that 'at its deepest level, place-based education is not merely about making education more meaningful or contributing to community life. It is about remembering a deeper and wider narrative of living and learning in connection with others and with the land'. Through changing the method of engaging on country, students and artists could produce new stories of learning. They were immersed in those engagements, telling stories that were almost impossible to produce through the everyday language of the classroom.

It was noted above how Bartleet et al. (2014) argue that the arts-based knowing lies beyond language, as something that can be 'painted, sculpted, danced, or sensed in and through music, moving images, architecture and poetry' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 157). Power and Bennett (2015) draw on Ellsworth's conception of pedagogy to privilege *openness, listening and being receptive to the other*. ABSL facilitates empathy, along with opportunities for students 'to be mindful and to inquire into spiritual values of silence, stillness, and space'

Conclusion

This project began through endeavours to find another strategy for teaching about Aboriginal art in the university classroom. It sought to avoid the widely accepted transmission-based approaches where students learn *about* Aboriginal Australia from the comfort and distance of their chairs and tables. Armchair approaches to learning inevitably perpetuate the widely held stereotypes of Aboriginal art as coming from the north of Australia. Our alternative strategy was to rely on strong personal relationships with Darug that had been developed over a long period of time, and aimed to learn from country in the city. The design of the project was a negotiated one and supported financially and politically by many people at Macquarie University.

Our objective was to decipher how country teaches in the city. The artist, Leanne Tobin talked initially about issues relating to a desire to manage and control country, and how environmentally destructive that approach had been across the Sydney basin over the previous 230 years of colonisation. We therefore established a project where students could learn what they were required to learn to become teachers, that is, a method of teaching local Aboriginal community art (rather than Aboriginal art) through practice. That practice was how to communicate with a small family of Darug artists, in a context where most university students have had little direct personal experience with Aboriginal people. Some students were learning how to engage with three Aboriginal people in a space that is often viewed as politically volatile and intimidating, while being inscribed in an understated story of coexistence on country, a story that was previously absent from their daily discourse in the city.

Teaching and learning are anthropocentric pursuits, with the focus on either quality teaching or independent student learning. The process is often presented as cognitive for both student and teacher, and is expected to come from one or the other, while context is often overlooked. Through formalisation of schooling, people have become the subject of teaching and learning, while country as a teacher has largely been forgotten. In the context of higher education, it is difficult for many to recognise how country teaches because pedagogy is directed at managing how teachers teach and how students learn. Students increasingly struggle to observe what is already happening around them, and to be *responsive*. Many struggle to be affected in a city awash with a technological life (Latour, 2004). Some no longer hear the relational stories of learning and teaching, while learning is linear with an overwhelming desire to show cause and effect relations. Places talk, they smell and they blow, but they often remain unheard or unfelt, at least in urban settings when students are encased by four walls. The ability to read the things that cannot be managed becomes more difficult.

In the context of the call from Fredericks (2013) and Moreton-Robinson (2011) to reframe Aboriginality within discourses that account for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban locations, this project has presented a narrative of local Darug artists working on country in Sydney to demonstrate that Aboriginal art has a place here too, with its own style, and also with stories of its own connections and engagements. Those stories tell of positive and ongoing engagements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, past and present on Darug country. The stories also show how country teaches in the city. It teaches both plants and animals (including humans). Like Leanne's own approach to teaching, country teaches informally. It does not teach from a position of authority, or from the front of the room.

We drew upon Latour's concept of learning to be *affected by place*. Students *responded* to other students' questions about what they were doing and why, and they were *moved* by the wind and dust and changing light. They observed numerous exchanges between Leanne, her brother and son, exchanges which many had not previously witnessed. They weren't taught these things and there wasn't a teacher telling them that they had to learn to feel and observe. There was no one telling them what to think about Aboriginal art, but they did walk away with a sense of being engaged in country with three students remarking at the conclusion of the project: 'I now feel like I am leaving a bit of me on campus (on country), there will be some of me here after I leave'. There is now a little bit of human in the murals, and something in the students that is not quite human.

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Notes on contributors

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Susan Page is located at the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges, University of Technology, Sydney. She is an Aboriginal academic whose research and publication focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of learning and academic work in higher education. Susan has been awarded a University Teaching Excellence award and has been successful in gaining a number of national competitive grants. She is an elected director of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (Aboriginal Corporation).

Leanne Tobin is a widely respected Darug artist working with schools and community organisations in the Sydney region. She won the Parliament of New South Wales Aboriginal Art Prize in 2013.

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