REVIEWS

Learning Spaces

A Review by ALISON REEDY

LEARNING SPACES: YOUTH, LITERACY AND NEW MEDIA IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

By INGE KRAL and JERRY SCHWAB

In Inge Kral and Jerry Schwab's new book *Learning Spaces: Youth, literacy and new media in remote Indigenous Australia*, a fresh and optimistic perspective is shown of the learning taking place outside of formal educational settings, by Indigenous youth in remote communities in Central Australia. This timely offering provides an alternate view to the deficit perspective overwhelmingly presented by the media, as well as by educators and scholars, to explain the failure of Indigenous learners in mainstream educational settings.

The ethnographic research and case studies presented in the book, instead, provide 'an affirmation of Indigenous youth potential' and a demonstration of the initiative, creativity and learning that is taking place, quietly, in non-institutional settings out of view of governments and policy makers. The research suggests that explanations for disengagement and poor learning outcomes for Indigenous youth are more likely to be systemic rather that cultural.

The research in *Learning Spaces* is wrapped in an easy to read format that is accessible to anyone interested in the here and now of youth learning and culture in remote Indigenous Australia. While the case studies show the intense connection of youth to place, *Learning Spaces* also makes the link between generational changes taking place internationally, as a result of digital media and the changing communication, learning and cultural practices of Indigenous youth.

The case studies in *Learning Spaces* show youth engaged in a range of projects over which they have ownership and agency. In these projects, literacy, language and technology are interwoven with culture in meaningful ways. The projects encompass art, music, performance, media production and small enterprise. Digital technologies are central to the projects and integral to the learning that takes place within them.

Digital technologies are also shown to provide Indigenous youth with the means to represent themselves to a world-wide audience and to do so in ways of their own choosing. The learning showcased in the case studies is 'variously self directed, peer-based, observational, experimental and often playful'. Similarly, the youth representations of themselves, their communities and projects reflect keen observation, a light-hearted view of community life and invariably a sense of humour.

While each case study in *Learning Spaces* is situated in the unique context of a particular community, eight design principles emerge that can be used to guide other communities seeking to establish or enhance community spaces where youth can extend their oral and written language and literacy skills, and creatively engage with digital media in meaningful ways. The design principles are also relevant for educators, academics, social workers, government agencies and policy makers grappling with questions on how to provide meaningful learning opportunities for Indigenous youth in remote locations.

While the authors acknowledge the relevance and effectiveness of mainstream schooling for some young people, the research recorded in *Learning Spaces* is a response to the disillusionment of many Indigenous youth in formal education and training. The case studies presented in the book provide examples of what can be done to re-engage disenfranchised Indigenous youth living in remote communities with learning. The next step is to reflect on the design principles that have emerged from the research, and to question if, and how, these principles relating to non-institutional learning spaces, can be applied to engage and retain Indigenous learners in formal educational contexts.

Talk, Text and Technology

A Review by JANET DYNE

TALK, TEXT AND TECHNOLOGY: LITERACY AND SOCIAL
PRACTICE IN A REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

By INGE KRAL

This is a wonderful book emerging from the author's 30 years of close and active engagement with remote Indigenous communities and their social practices. In particular, it traces the history of the uptake and embrace of literacy practices by the people of Ngaanyatjarra Lands of the Western Desert region, centred in the community of Warburton in Western Australia. Inge Kral understands literacy as 'one facet of a rich and nuanced language environment' (p.2), an environment that includes oral, written, visual, gestural and symbolic forms of communication. Her study is not concerned with literacy in terms of 'competence,' but rather in terms of 'performance': what people do with it. *Talk, Text and Technology* is an ethnographic study telling the story of how contemporary literacy practices are being adapted and integrated into life around Warburton.

Throughout the book, Kral brings together a wealth of scholarship, drawing from anthropology, sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication, social learning theory, language socialisation and the social history of the region to throw further light upon her findings. Her style of writing is at once scholarly and an excellent read. Some passages read like well-referenced and insightful yarns. Another strength of the work is the use of the direct accounts of members of the community, telling the stories of literacy practice in their lives in their own words.

The book opens with an introduction to the people, the *yarnangu*, of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and aspects of their culture. It includes family trees showing the intergenerational connections of people whose accounts feature in the book. At the end there is a glossary of Ngaanyatjarra terms that are used in the text and an Appendix with data concerning assessments of adult literacy

competence, both in English and in Ngaanyatjarra language, that have been carried out in the community for other research purposes.

The main body of the study is divided into three parts. Part 1 focuses on the current role of literacy in a broad range of social practices within the community with many well-documented examples, ranging from naming practices for new-borns and children's birthday parties through to funerals.

In the second part, Kral traces the historical development of language and literacy practices in the community from 'mission time' from the 1930s to the early 1950s, through to 'Native Welfare time' from the 1950s to the early 1970s, to 'self-determination' from 1972. At the same time as giving an account of the taking up of Western literacy practices in the region, this section provides a fascinating documentation of its broader social history. It traces the way in which access to interpreting Western culture was facilitated through the early practice of Bible reading and how literacy practices went on to be developed and used by young adults, versed in the modern style of literacy through schooling and Bible colleges, to deal on behalf of elders and their communities with government agencies, governance issues and land rights claims.

In Part 3, Kral returns to the issue of leadership coming from young people as agents of change, a huge shift in the social order, this time with respect to the *current* generation of young adults and adolescents. Here she discusses the impact and embrace of digital technology among youth in remote communities and the 'explosion in creative multimodal literacies' that it is enabling (248). This comes alongside the recent phenomenon of on-going connection with 'global culture' while living in Ngaanyatjarra Lands embedded in Ngaanyatjarra culture with the potential opportunities and challenges this situation presents. Part three also brings an anthropological focus to other factors influencing literacy practice in the community, including the use of living space and related issues around the keeping of personal effects, such as 'the artefacts of literacy' (208).

In tracing the history of literacy development in the communities of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Kral points out how from mission days 'literacy … was imbued with a social purpose and cultural meaning, rather than advanced as a technical skill that would enhance employability in the labour market economy. This in turn has shaped the manner in which people have taken hold of literacy for cultural and political purposes and how they have integrated alphabetic literacy into their existing communicative repertoire' (204).

The publication of Kral's observations and analyses appears timely and very relevant to current concerns over the direction in which mainstream language, literacy and numeracy policies seem to be globally trending, that is,

towards a narrow focus on industry-driven employability skills. In the reality that an ethnographic study such as Kral's is able to document, we find demonstration of the nature and importance of literacy practices within the much broader spectrum of social practice in the life of a community.

At times Kral's ethnographic study draws from an even deeper well, touching on ways in which literacy practices from the early days when people began to read the Bible and the hymn book to the contemporary use of digital literacy have modified concepts of personhood among the people of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. In such a way the study also points far beyond Ngaanyatjarra Lands, a way beyond Warburton, indicating the role of the development of literacy practices in the formation of persons and communities generally.

Kral's ethnographic study is an important book that should contribute much to the way in which literacy programs are understood and delivered. In particular, it will assist those planning and working on literacy programs in remote Indigenous communities to understand the big picture of 'what literacy might look like' in a community and how it might operate in community life. A significant implication of *Talk, Text and Technology* is that before importing literacy 'interventions' into a community, the development of literacy capacity might best begin with recognition of the literacy practices in which people are already engaging, alongside the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which these practices are ever evolving.