

**Digital storytelling, image-making and self-representation:  
Building digital literacy as an ethical response for supporting Aboriginal young peoples' visual identities**

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## Research Article

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# ABSTRACT

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Aboriginal culture in southeast Australia was severely disrupted by colonisation, the effects of which continue to reverberate within that community today. Visual material produced by Aboriginal people in the southeast during the colonial period was often used as a means for classifying and labelling people; many images were used to justify the idea of the so-called inevitable decline of Aboriginal people and to reinforce racist stereotypes. Counter to this colonialist trope, we report on a digital storytelling workshop conducted with Aboriginal young people from southeast Australia, which sought to develop digital literacy as an ethical imperative. In the workshop Aboriginal youth constructed visual content that supported their explorations of their identity and culture, and developed their capacity to control digital self-representations; this worked to also challenge the traditional concept of digital storytelling as a linear, first-person, autobiographical narrative. Some images that are produced and consumed in the digital realm may provoke inappropriate and racist responses, a reality among Aboriginal communities that is potentially aggravated by the rapid transmission of digital images via social network sites. The digital literacy approach used in the workshop was developed as an ethical response to the use of visual methods in research with Aboriginal young people.

*Keywords:* digital literacy, Aboriginal young people, digital storytelling, visual identity, ethics

## Introduction

In southeast Australia, the detrimental effects of more than two centuries of colonisation complicates the use of visual material in digital stories made by Aboriginal young people. Assimilation policies, which sought to deny Aboriginal people's culture and identities (HREOC 1997), were reflected in the collection and distribution of visual material made by or about Aboriginal people from the earliest days of colonisation. Visual material was frequently used to reinforce a taxonomy of difference between the so-called primitive 'Other' and colonising forces (McQuire 1998; Russell 2001), and to provide evidence of a 'dying race' (Attwood 2003; Broome 2005). Research involving Aboriginal people and the use of visual methods is subsequently embedded in the historical contexts of assimilation and discrimination which sought to control Aboriginal people and to deny their culture (Lydon 2015; Kleinert 2006). Adopting an ethical approach to visual research demands recognition of the need to mitigate power imbalances, and to actively address disadvantage and marginalisation of Aboriginal people as a minority group (Banks 2001; Clark 2012).

This paper provides an ethical framework for the use of visual methods by young Aboriginal people as they explore their digital identities. It focuses on the first of three digital storytelling workshops, conducted as part of a three year Australian Research Council Linkage Project by University of Melbourne researchers in partnership with the Victorian health promotion organisation, VicHealth, the Indigenous production company SistaGirl Productions, and Australia's principle screen culture and film institution, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). The project is also supported by Korin Gamadji Institute (KGI) at the Richmond Football Club, from where the young people are recruited. 1 We use examples from the first digital storytelling workshop, conducted in October 2014 with young Aboriginal participants, together with their responses to a focus group discussion at the end of the workshop to position digital literacy as an ethical imperative in the use of digital-visual methods. Digital literacy in this context is broadly defined and incorporates learning to use the technology, while acknowledging the need for culturally and socially relevant support in negotiating the production and distribution of images to tell stories.

Our rationale for positioning digital literacy as an ethical imperative is contextual and relevant to the circumstances of the Aboriginal young people involved in the project. We reflect on the historical legacy of the colonial visual archive and its continuing impact on negative stereotypes, which limit understandings of the diversity of Aboriginality (Browning 2010; Lane 2014). We consider this along with the ongoing effects of colonisation and its implications for the creation of digital-visual material by youth today. Further, the impact of Web 2.0 technology, which enables the increasing consumption and production of images through ever-expanding online networks, is considered in relation to the potential of digitally distributed images to reinforce discriminatory stereotypes.

In this paper we also reflect on our observations of several methods used in the digital

storytelling workshop and offer insights for future considerations. The methods were aimed in two directions: firstly, reinforcing Aboriginal young people's digital literacy skills to support their control of, and expertise in, using technology to assert self-representations (Collin, Rahilly et al. 2011); and secondly, continuing to 'work through' the political conditions of the contemporary archive in which such representations are located.

## Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a practice that provides 'ordinary' people with opportunities to tell their stories through personal images and narratives, particularly those of memory and remembrance. Digital storytelling is typically conducted in intensive 3-4 day workshops where specialist facilitators assist participants to develop short (approximately 1-5 minutes) autobiographical, multimedia narratives generally using text, photography, music and voice-over narration. The tendency is to focus on a personalised retelling of significant events; these are later edited into an audio-visual video (CDS n.d.; Hartley and McWilliam 2009; Lambert 2013). Digital Storytelling is also considered 'co-creative' media production, which reflects the inclusive process of creating and telling a story while participants learn to use new technology (Simondson 2009; Spurgeon, Burgess et al. 2009). It can also provide a means for supporting initiatives for social change (de Tolly 2007; Sabiescu 2009; Spurgeon, Burgess et al. 2009)

The traditional methods of digital storytelling, which emerged in the 1990s (Lambert 2013), have shifted from the materiality of the analogue photograph, often reclaimed from the family photo album, to images retrieved from Web 2.0 enabled devices. Today, these images are readily produced and shared on camera-enabled smartphones and iPads and supported through social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram. The current generation of digital and social media technology (Web 2.0) provides more people than ever before, including Indigenous young people, with the ability to make and manage their own images via digital media (Kral 2014:16; Kral 2010a; Kral 2011; Kral and Schwab 2012; Adelson and Olding 2013; Wexler, Eglinton et al. 2014).

Research from remote Australia and Canada has shown that digital technologies can support and enhance Aboriginal young people's sense of community, their literacy levels and engagement with global youth culture (Deger 2013; Kral 2010b; Featherstone 2013; Kral 2012; Kral and Schwab 2012; Adelson and Olding 2013; Wexler, Eglinton et al. 2014). However, in southeast Australia there is no sustained study of the impact of this new media environment or its potential to assist Aboriginal young people from that region (DEECD 2010b; Edmonds, Rachinger et al. 2012).

## A collaborative and participatory methodology, digital literacy and ethics

A collaborative and participatory methodology was adopted during the workshop discussed here, which focused on an inclusive, community-based approach to digital storytelling. This is consistent with a decolonising approach to research – a broad

rethinking of the relationship between the academy and Indigenous peoples involved in research. In this project a decolonising approach to research begins with the recognition of the 'radically unequal context of colonialism' and the imperative to 're-center' Indigenous perspectives in the research process (Coburn 2013: 3). As Indigenous scholars have argued, this offers 'a means of challenging the colonial institutional relations and practices that have constituted Indigenous peoples as objects of research rather than as authorities about their own ways of knowing, being and doing' (Coburn 2013:1; cf Smith 1999).

Aboriginal participation in the research process is therefore critical for 'a more or less equal dialogue with the Aboriginal community' (Coburn, Moreton-Robinson et al. 2013:3). In this project, the inclusion of Aboriginal voices was central to enabling an Aboriginal-driven conceptualisation of digital literacy to emerge. This inclusive process also aimed to provide avenues for Aboriginal management and control of their knowledge and visual representations in the digital realm (Carlson 2013). The research therefore endeavoured to 'produce knowledge that makes sense in terms of [Indigenous peoples'] lived realities, experiences and challenges' (Coburn, Moreton-Robinson et al. 2013: 11).

## The impact of colonisation on Aboriginal knowledge and visual culture

In Australian Aboriginal culture, stories reinforce the integration of all aspects of society in accordance with Aboriginal ontologies, and support the transfer of information across generations, including connections to Country and kin (Janke 2007; Nakata and Langton 2007). Aboriginal stories can be represented through a range of media, including the designs and markings found on objects such as possum skin cloaks, weaving and wooden artefacts, which reveal a visual rhetoric and a communication through images (Edmonds 2012). This visual rhetoric has endured; this is despite attempts by non-Aboriginal people to represent Aboriginal people and their cultural practices through a visual language largely constructed through a colonialist endeavour to control, classify and label the Aboriginal population (Russell 2001; Lydon 2005).

The colonial bureaucracy in Victoria was the earliest in Australia to introduce legislation determining Aboriginality according to a person's bloodlines and skin colour, enacting policies to assimilate Aboriginal people with 'white' society (Stephens 2003). Subsequently, Aboriginal people and their culture were considered on the verge of extinction (Attwood 2003; Broome 2005). In response, white settlers collected and exhibited Aboriginal visual culture, particularly objects and photographs, which were used to define authentic Aboriginality (Kleinert 2002). Photographs frequently positioned Aboriginals within the context of the 'native' on the brink of becoming civilised, caught between two cultures (Lydon 2005). By the 21st century, however, rather than evidencing the success of assimilation, collections of Aboriginal peoples' visual culture were testament to the rapidly changing lifestyles of people in the southeast, their resilience and capacity to adapt and survive in the face of change (Edmonds and Clarke 2009).

## The legacy of the visual archive

Today, visual materials belonging to Aboriginal families or in archival collections are viewed as significant cultural reminders, affirming people's knowledge of who they are and where they come from (Huebner 2013; Kleinert 2006). This rich visual archive provides personal, social and political memories; many images and objects remain valued among a community where issues of identity and authenticity continue to be contested by mainstream audiences (Huebner 2013). In the southeast, collections of photographs and material-culture have assisted cultural reclamation processes, including the revival of southeast Australian Aboriginal art practices, and as evidence in native title claims to establish kinship connections, and peoples' relationships with places and histories (Russell 2010; Jones 2014).

However, a legacy of inequality in the production of the archive lingers, particularly in ongoing tensions around the ownership and dissemination of many images (Lydon 2012). Thus, affirmative uses of visual materials demands a critical frame of analysis and interpretation. This is particularly the case for images relating to stories that are difficult to tell.

## 'Shame'

A reluctance to publically acknowledge culture and share stories associated with the pain and trauma of the past contributed to a legacy of 'hidden histories' (Russell 2007). Recently, however, more Aboriginal stories are becoming publically available, due to peoples' capacity to explore, retrieve, distribute and control their representations through digital technology (Featherstone 2013). This new visibility is, however, not without challenges.

These challenges were demonstrated during *Telling our Stories*, a digital storytelling project conducted in 2013, with a group of Aboriginal young people in Melbourne's inner-north (Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014). In that project many of the participants were concerned that their stories had the potential to elicit 'shame'. In the Aboriginal community, shame has broader implications than among the non-Aboriginal community and can include embarrassment due to unwanted attention, alongside attempts to avoid failure rather than seeking success.<sup>2</sup> Shame can extend throughout the community with ongoing consequences for the individual and their families.<sup>3</sup> Stories that reinforce trauma and sadness, including those associated with the 'Stolen Generations' (the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families) can have widespread and ongoing effects (HREOC 1997). In the digital storytelling context, stories may be complicated by the notion of 'shame', particularly if the maker is concerned that their stories do not accurately represent themselves, their families or their communities (Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014). Shame also relates to privacy (what is and is not appropriate to share publicly), but in a manner that complicates the Western idea of privacy as primarily an individual 'right' (Lasen and Gomez-Cruz 2009; Koorie Youth Council 2013). The socially networked digital realm calls for participant awareness of the complexities of sharing such

content, particularly as relatively uncensored online distribution of digital images is an increasing reality (Gubrium, Hill et al. 2014).

## Stereotypes

Discriminatory visual representations of Aboriginal people continue to influence ideas of Aboriginality. Stereotypes of Indigenous people – including those based on a reductive and homogenised ‘primitivist’ paradigm – influence ideas of who is, and who is not, a ‘real’ Aboriginal person. Binary constructions, delineating the so-called ‘authentic north’ from the urbanised ‘inauthentic south’ (Peters-Little 2002; Davis and Moreton 2011; Harris, Carlson et al. 2013), also influence visual representations of authenticity. Relevant representations include the globally recognised dot and circle paintings from Central Australia, or the predominance of films depicting so-called ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people and their cultures from the more isolated areas of the country, compared to stories about Aboriginal people living in more urbanised regions (Edmonds and Clarke 2009; Davis and Moreton 2011).

Stereotypes have detrimental effects on Aboriginal young people, contributing to their experiences of racism, and affecting their mental health, social inclusion and wellbeing (Ferdinand, Paradies et al. 2012). This extends to the digital sphere, where the ever-expanding use of camera-enabled mobile devices for producing and consuming visual data through Social Network Sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Instagram, demands awareness of the complexities surrounding the control of digital images. For instance, in the Telling our Stories project, despite participants’ ability to relay powerful first-hand narratives of their personal experiences, some of the visual content had the potential to reinforce stereotypes, especially if viewers concentrated on the images at the expense of the narrative (Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014). This is also accentuated by the proliferation and sharing of seemingly ephemeral images, such as ‘selfies’ and pictures of ‘big nights out’. As people now have almost unlimited capacity to produce and disseminate any images through online social networks, these images tend to remain relatively uncensored, compared to the traditional filtering of the offline family photo album or institutional cultural archives (Edmonds 2014; Vivienne and Burgess 2013).

## Uncensored images and informed consent

Unlike previous digital storytelling workshops where some degree of censorship was imposed on the use of analogue images, for instance those retrieved from family photo albums,<sup>4</sup> the online distribution and sharing of information via Web 2.0 technologies allows distributed audiences to interactively engage with, and respond in, a number of ways to images. This includes commenting on, ‘liking’, re-mediating and redistributing the information among multiple networked publics. Such broad distribution potentially complicates youth’s willingness to share material through digital storytelling that they might later regret posting in the digital sphere (Drew, Duncan et al. 2010). Despite participants providing informed consent before participating in digital storytelling workshops (which in our study includes the sharing and exhibiting of stories with other members of the Aboriginal community), such consent does not necessarily cover the way

participants may feel about the stories in the future (Edmonds 2014).

Moreover, images are multivalent. The use of photographs without the consent of others (e.g. family, friends and so on), who deliberately or inadvertently appear in participants’ digital stories, demands that researchers acknowledge the limitations of one-off informed consent and work to remedy these limitations (Wiles, Prosser et al. 2008; Clark 2012). The capacity for anyone to upload a digital story to the internet means that new challenges arise in negotiating issues of privacy and publicness. The dissemination of online visual content, coupled with expanding levels of viewer interaction with digital images, means that many images are now accessible beyond their original intended audiences (McQuire 2015).

These considerations highlight the implications of widespread access to uncensored imagery and other types of information via SNS. Such images can be problematic particularly in the Aboriginal community if they reinforce persistent negative stereotypes leading to cyber-bullying, online racism and lateral violence<sup>5</sup> (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011; Hogan, Rennie et al. 2013; Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014). Recent interviews with two groups of Aboriginal young people in Victoria revealed that all had experienced negative and racist online content (Edmonds, Rachinger et al. 2012). Other research also confirms that racism continues as ‘a substantial issue in the everyday lives of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people’ (DEECD 2010a: 54; cf Ferdinand, Paradies et al. 2012). Providing opportunities for youth to discover and determine appropriate visual content for use in stories, therefore, requires appropriate scaffolding to enhance their knowledge of the digital field and its potential to positively reinforce identity and culture.

## Digital literacy: an ethical imperative when using visual methods

With these lessons in mind, we examine the digital storytelling workshop within the context of a broad and culturally inclusive idea of digital literacy. Visual content was imagined and produced by workshop participants through a creative engagement with archives and technology to assist them in exploring their identities. Additionally, digital literacy was framed as an ethical imperative, where participants were provided with access to new types of visual media production, including opportunities for expanding IT skills; heightening awareness of the responsible transmission of their experiences as young Aboriginals; and recognising the potential impact of youth-generated stories for influencing contemporary Aboriginal knowledge and culture. From research conducted during a pilot project with the same group of young people, we knew many were anxious to learn more about their identities, and to explore modes of expression through digital stories that would support their endeavours to further their cultural knowledge (Edmonds, Rachinger et al. 2014).

Learning how to use new software also responded to the project’s aim to develop youths’ digital literacy by increasing their knowledge of the resources available to create stories through images, text and sound. Rather than relying on personal photographs or

videos, which more readily identify the maker and limit the participants' opportunities to explore and reflect their own identities, the project sought to extend the possibilities for expression by facilitating different modes of digital and online representation. By offering participants alternative considerations for stories, beyond those of memory and remembrance, we could also respond to the reluctance of some participants to utilise revealing personal images as the central focus of their narratives (Edmonds, Rachinger et al 2014). It also reduced otherwise problematic options associated with using images that identify participants and that may unintentionally circulate out of context. This responded to the earlier Telling Our Stories project, where participants recounted experiencing 'shame' if they felt their stories were not adequately representational of their ambitions and lifestyles (Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014).

However, the intention of the project was not to hide the young people or their stories behind a veneer of creativity, but rather to open a space for constructing a more complex visual rhetoric, that would allow their knowledge and experiences to be distributed more or less confidently by them across time and space. In the current project, the young people digitally constructed and frequently remediating their visual content, thereby exercising close control over the extent of their personal recognition by audiences.

## The Workshop

The digital storytelling workshop was conducted over 4.5 days in October 2014 with five Aboriginal young people, four females and one male, aged between 15 and 18 years. All were alumni of the Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leaders (REAL) program connected with KGI and were recruited from across Victoria and southern NSW. Although the participant numbers were small, the diversity of the participants' backgrounds and their recruitment from across Victoria and southern New South Wales enabled a variety of stories to emerge, which broadly reflect issues confronting Aboriginal young people in the southeast. The workshop was held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), with a half-day introduction to the project at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria.

As discussed above, a collaborative and participatory methodology focused on an inclusive, community-based approach to digital storytelling. During the week, participants worked with a range of people from ACMI, Bunjilaka, KGI and the University of Melbourne. Having Aboriginal experts, including researchers, Elders artists and filmmakers, involved in the workshop was also critical to providing an environment supportive of decolonising approaches to research. These approaches ensured that the workshop provided participants with a culturally-safe environment (cf Edmonds, Chenhall et al. 2014). The presence of Aboriginal experts working alongside participants in the workshop also promoted an Aboriginal-driven conceptualisation of digital literacy to emerge.

The experience at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria included a Welcome to the project, by the renowned Boonwurrung Elder and actor, Uncle Jack Charles, the Yorta Yorta/Mutti Mutti/Wemba Wemba/Boonwurrung artist Maree Clarke and museum curators. The museum

visit enabled participants to explore the exhibitions and back-of-house collections with curators, and to hear stories about Aboriginal histories and culture, while learning about how the collections influence contemporary artists and their artwork. By viewing Australian Indigenous cultural collections, as well as engaging with contemporary visual artworks and objects displayed in the First Peoples' exhibition at Bunjilaka, the museum experience provided a range of perspectives for the young people to think about their stories.

The facilitators and technicians from ACMI, alongside the Aboriginal filmmaker, Kimba Thompson from Sista Girl productions, and an Aboriginal scriptwriter and research assistant, Angelina Hurley, provided support to participants over the four days. Working at ACMI provided participants with access to a range of innovative and interactive digital technologies, including the 3D software, RGBD, and a time-lapse/animation program, DragonFrame, along with access to iPads to take digital photographs and videos. This allowed participants to engage with, and learn about, digital art-making programs, and to construct original moving-image sequences that supported their conceptions of their identity. The process sought to encourage imaginative approaches to storytelling across a broad range of genres, in contrast to a narrower focus on narratives of memory and remembrance (Vivienne 2014). Participants explored genres ranging from science fiction to MTV music videos.

## Co-creativity: commendations

As researchers, we emphasised the expertise that all contributors brought to the workshop. This inclusive approach intersects with the co-creative approach to digital storytelling, as participants learnt to use the software through collaborating with technicians to make images for inclusion in their stories. Formulating the digital stories was therefore participatory and shared (Simondson 2009). The dynamic capabilities of the digital tools also allowed participants to determine visual content that responded to their perceptions of technology as a multisensory resource, which is creative, entertaining, interactive and tactile, while supporting young peoples' digital constructions of self. This was clearly articulated by one of the female participants:

Jenny<sup>6</sup>: My favourite [digital art program] would have had to have been the cut and paste animation and I really enjoyed that because it was really hands on. You got to make it. It was just really fun to just cut things out and make it all yourself. It was a digital thing but it was sort of old school as well.

The co-creative nature of the workshop also corresponded with participants' expectations, as they considered it necessary to receive instructions about the technology from experts throughout the workshop, and then apply these skills to their own productions. The young people were adamant that the structure and support provided by ACMI and SistaGirl were crucial to their overall learning experience.

Charlotte: the fact that [the ACMI facilitators] would sit down and explain to us

in parts of how the software works, what it is supposed to do, how it is supposed to be done. Just like the steps they take to prepare us for the final thing that we have to do. I guess it's a good procedure to equip us with the skills...

Leon: considering today, on Friday [the last day of the workshop], we were basically on our own, most of the time figuring out what we can add to our final edits to the story we made. I think that's good, we actually were able to do some things on our own... [It showed that] we learned from the past few days, what we can actually do with the software and programs...

Nikita: I liked the RGBD [3D software]. I guess it was something different. I myself would probably never have used it because it looked so complicated, but with the help of all the crew it kind of helped and if people knew how to use a lot of the things they would do it.

The technology at ACMI was equipped to provide innovative visual material, allowing youth to express their identities across genres. However, the creative visual content that emerged was enhanced by some participants' ability to conceptualise and convey distinctive narratives that supported their stories.

Two participants developed highly creative narratives in relation to their digital images, reflecting the benefits of having a story in mind that resonated with their digital art works. For example, the young male participant, Leon, drew on his fascination with, and skills in, computer gaming design; he positioned himself as a Gundidjtmara warrior from southwest Victoria, and manipulated the 3D RGBD software to create a story reminiscent of Star Wars. His narrative supported the imagery he had created and illustrated the capacity for youth to tell stories across genres, while exploring new avenues for image-making and asserting their identities.

Leon: I like the RGBD too, because I didn't realise that your Xbox can connect a camera to it and make 3D images. I never knew that was a thing, so I was instantly hooked [and it helped me to come up with my idea for the story]. Just the thought of a 3D image is amazing considering that we are only in this pilot stage of the digital age... But I just love mixing around with the software with what we used to make the image look different... vertical lines and horizontal lines, make it all blurry, wavy, I just love that.

Another participant, Nikita, revealed through her story that thinking about and conceptualising the narrative, alongside the construction of the visual content prior to editing, can result in a powerful representation of contemporary issues affecting Aboriginal youth and how these impact on identity construction. Nikita used the cut and paste DragonFrame animation software to create a visual story using multiple moving images of her eyes, as a window into her perceptions of the way others see her culture and identity. She included her iPad film, which was made on the banks of the Yarra River (Birrarung Mar), where she reflectively performed her identity, using herself and the landscape as the main focus. Nikita included her RGBD footage in her introduction,

where her dance routine (choreographed and performed by her in the Cube at ACMI), was recontextualised as a 3-dimensional image reminiscent of MTV music videos. Her poetic voice-over, alongside her images effectively supported a profound audio-visual narrative of the effects that discrimination and stereotypes can have on Aboriginal people, their ability to feel accepted and to belong within and outside their communities. In response to the digital storytelling workshop as a process that assisted in exploring identity and culture, Nikita offered these insights:

Nikita: I guess I just looked around and saw how many people and how different they were, but I kinda thought how many times they acknowledge it as part of their identity, but hid some away... [I]t's kind of like, when you see someone down the street and they're smiling and then they get home alone they are crying in their room because they don't want to show that side of them. Through the whole week I just wanted to kind of show my identity to encourage others to show theirs, because I know a lot of people, some people are afraid of different aspects of their identity, but they shouldn't be; because how can they expect others to accept them if they can't accept themselves.

Nikita's powerful story illustrates the ambivalence of Aboriginal young people in the southeast as they strive to find new ways of safely asserting their identities in the digital space. Her story also reveals that developing a narrative that effectively intersects with newly created digital images is important in transmitting cultural and social information in the digital realm, particularly when working towards improving digital literacy.

## Co-creativity: constraints

Although digital storytelling is conceptualised as a participatory process where co-creativity is central to the mediated workshop experience (Simondson 2009), the co-creative approach in this workshop revealed some constraints. These included restrictions on participants operating some of the more technical digital equipment. For example, participants had limited capacity to work behind the camera when filming the RGBD, which was largely controlled by ACMI technical professionals. The restrictive timeframes also affected participants' ability to experiment freely with the technology and to fully develop their narratives (including their voiceovers, sounds and music to accompany their story). The overall studio environment ultimately demonstrated that participants had less control over the technology than anticipated.

During the workshop, tensions between the process (thinking about, experimenting and making visually exciting content), and the production and technological outcomes (having a finished digital story to take home), heightened issues of control. As Gubrium and colleagues (2014) have found in conducting digital storytelling with Indigenous youth in Canada, the intense nature of the workshop experience can reveal the pressure that facilitators encounter and that they can influence the participant's story, inadvertently imposing their own agendas. These researchers also suggest that the storyteller's 'well-being and autonomy of voice should be at the center of a project'; they emphasise that, for facilitators, 'reflexive attention to issues of power and a sense of cultural humility are

key to excellent facilitation' (Gubrium, Hill et al. 2014:1607).

Hence, our observations have prompted reconsiderations for future workshops. Specifically, adjustments to the workshop would include providing participants with greater access to independently controlled mobile devices (e.g. iPads and smartphones), loaded with a range of applications that support film, editing and digital art-making, to harness the routine use of mobile technology in the everyday lives of young people. The agentive qualities and growing demand for mobile devices, which allow the rapid and independently controlled sharing of data across online social networks, recognises the capacity to shift the control of digital storytelling and image-making further into the hands of the creator. Using mobile technologies allows for flexible timeframes to be adopted in the making of stories, as devices can be used outside of workshop hours, while enabling digital literacy skills to be contextualized and transferred to young people's everyday experiences (Kral and Schwab 2012).<sup>7</sup>

## Building digital literacy: mobile devices, 'apps' and situated learning

One aspect of the overall three-year digital storytelling project, which intersects with our ambitions to incorporate the use of mobile devices in future workshops, is the development of a digital storytelling application (an 'app'). The app is currently a prototype being developed by Master of Information Technology interns from the University of Melbourne in collaboration with KGI participants. Its development began some months before the initial digital storytelling workshop (Edmonds, Rachinger et al. 2014). During the focus group discussion, participants' ideas for the apps functionality included imagining how Aboriginal cultural connections could be managed and distributed among broad online networks.

Additionally, the responses from participants during the focus group discussion positioned the centrality of mobile devices and apps in the creation and dissemination of visual material as integral to their lived experiences, which reinforces the idea of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Situated learning provides opportunities for encouraging the production of knowledge through informal and formal learning, which is contextual, embedded in 'social practice', and accentuates learning for life (Kral and Schwab 2012: 9). Further, situated learning also supports experimentation and 'mucking around' (Kral and Schwab 2012: 65-68; Ito, Baumer et al. 2010) and resonates with Indigenous pedagogies, where watching and listening before doing are important for promoting skills and confidence among learners, while supporting methods that integrate cultural knowledge and understandings alongside the learning process (Yunkaporta 2007; Nakata 2007; Kral 2013).

In the following conversation participants demonstrated their capacity to conceptualise the app as a tool that could contribute to and expand their informal approaches to learning about each other and their culture:

Jenny: if we posted the stories that we did today on [the digital storytelling app]

and other kids did that, then I would be on there for ages just looking at everyone's stories... they are all a minute, like everyone's got a minute to watch something, and if they were all constructed in that kind of way of just cut and paste animation...using different ideas and programs to get the point across... I wouldn't watch something for a minute if it wasn't creative and didn't have anything to it.

Tammy: [I'd use the app because] it is a good way to get to know other peoples' stories, and see what sort of life they have lived.

Charlotte: I think if [the app was developed into a social network among communities]...that would explode within the Aboriginal culture. That'd be pretty big.

Leon: it would rival other social media networks....

Charlotte: it wouldn't be like Facebook, not all that stuff that happens on there.

Leon: it would be our own unique thing.

Charlotte: sharing cultures, our own experiences, between different [people]...

The budding digital storytelling app has the potential to support situated learning. Apps are embedded in practices that youth are familiar with and can control; they have a degree of expertise in using apps; and through experimentation, apps can encourage young people's self-directed, productive activity (Hide 2014). Importantly, as Kral contends, having the space to 'muck around' (on an app for instance), also provides youth with the opportunity to acquire skills through informal learning, which are contextual and transferable outside the workshop experience (Kral and Schwab 2012; Ito, Baumer et al. 2010).

## Building digital literacy: connecting up

Although the digital storytelling workshop focused on technologies that are not available for use on mobile devices (e.g. RGBD), the significance of mobile devices was evidenced throughout the workshop. For instance, participants were simultaneously engaged formally in the workshop process, while informally 'mucking around' and sharing their experiences online via SNS, such as Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat. These were accessed on their mobile phones or the iPads provided in the workshop. The SNS activities highlighted the notion of 'co-presencing', where young people's face-to-face encounters are simultaneously negotiated alongside their online-networked publics. As the media researchers Marsha Berry and Max Schleser reveal, these events exemplify the 'emergent socialities associated with mobile social media' (Berry and Schleser 2014: 3). Online social connections are also spaces that young people control:

Jenny: I think it's becoming more of a thing now that we are all on technology a lot. And so the other day when we were sitting Snapchatting each other... it sounds silly



because we were in the same room, but it was connecting us. We use technology to connect us even if we are all together.

As this participant articulates, the idea of being connected and ‘mucking around’ on technology allows youth to reinforce their sense of self (boyd 2014). It also realises an ongoing capacity for cultural adaptation and change, where access to and control of technology empowers people to determine their self-representations, while simultaneously furthering opportunities for explorations of culture and identity. In relation to Facebook, the Aboriginal academic Brownyn Carlson observes that technology acts as a platform, which allows for the:

discursive act of re-presenting identity where this is ambiguous, fraught or unknown. It is here in the online space that subjects can consciously shape themselves to meet the expectations of other Aboriginal people who may be looking (Carlson 2013:162).

The digital storytelling workshop encouraged participants’ innovative and competent use of new media, in order to create and perform their visual assertions of identity and culture. However, as discussed above, to maximize the potential of digital technology, future workshops would benefit from enhanced use of mobile devices. Additionally, paying attention to content development, creating images and narratives, alongside the technical modes of production, would reposition co-creativity as situated, contextual, and accountable to the specific needs of a group. In this instance, a more situated approach could address the various ways in which young people use technology to assert identity:

Tammy: ... in our culture we usually [tell stories] through art and art takes a long time like different weaving and stuff, and with [digital] photos you can capture a moment within two seconds, however long. I think that is one thing to our advantage to be able to tell a [digital] story for it to go for a minute and it can say so many words in just one image.

## Building digital literacy: closing the ‘participation gap’ and social justice

For Aboriginal young people, access to learning that is culturally inclusive and learner-centered (i.e. initiated by the students themselves) can provide alternatives to mainstream education (DEECD 2010a). As researchers such as Watkins (2011) Spurgeon and Burgess et al (2009), and Tacchi and Kiran (2008) acknowledge, a ‘participation gap’ exists for marginalised communities in relation to appropriate access to and use of technology. In Australia the ‘participation gap’ also refers to fewer opportunities for Aboriginal young people compared to non-Aboriginal youth to complete their education and reap the benefits of the digital economy (AIATSIS 2009; Biddle 2010). The digital ethnographer, danah boyd’s in-depth study of American teenagers and their use of technology and social media, acknowledges the uneven distribution of technological skills and media literacy among youth. Furthermore, boyd critiques the naïve notion of the ‘digital native’ as someone who has never known a time before the availability of online technologies and is therefore an expert in using them. She argues that ‘teens will not

become critical contributors to this ecosystem simply because they were born in an age when these technologies were pervasive’ (boyd 2014:177).

Making tailored approaches to learning more widely available, which assists marginalised groups to overcome discrimination, is increasingly possible via digital technology (Walsh, Lemon et al. 2011; Tacchi 2009; Spurgeon, Burgess et al. 2009). However, while digital networks may support marginalised youth, it is also conceivable that they may exacerbate economic and civic inequality as they further assist the already-privileged (Tacchi 2014). Thus, the digital-storytelling workshop was directed towards participants learning to create innovative digital-visual content, while simultaneously negotiating the social, cultural and political contexts for generating stories that they felt were important to them.

When asked by the researcher, ‘what makes a good digital story?’, participants primarily focused on the way stories can provoke emotive responses from viewers, with the potential to change attitudes. Most participants’ stories drew on themes that promoted alternative ways of seeing contemporary Aboriginal youth culture, challenging the stereotypes of Aboriginality as fixed in a particular time and place, and providing progressive insights to explorations of Aboriginal diversity.

Jenny – so what makes a good story? I think ... a lot of people are interested in other people’s lives, so anything to do with a person, whether it be an opinion, an insight, anything about a person could be interesting if you present it the right way.

Leon – [for me it’s the] experiences of people, sharing their own stories, their experiences [of] what they have achieved through life, or what they are experiencing at the moment...

Nikita – I guess different perspectives is what people look for in a story, because they know that some stories are just plain and simple just one way to it, but there’s also different insights and I think that if there is more than one [aspect], they kind of think [well] I wanna know how it goes.

Tammy – I think when some people can relate to your story they know some of the things you might have gone through. It sort of interests them in a way... and [they] think ‘oh that’s how I feel’.

Charlotte – I guess if you put your emotions, like everything you feel into it, I guess you get more out of it... if people can relate to it then they take more of an interest and if they can feel your emotion through that story then people would be more attentive to it.

Nikita – I guess anybody can tell their story in any medium they want, it just depends on your audience and who you want to share it [with], because there [are] a lot of ignorant people...they don’t want to hear our story [but] there will be someone who will.

While the participants' digital stories positively assert contemporary Aboriginalities, the workshop also raised questions about how information, images and knowledge generated in the digital sphere are managed and disseminated, including what is and is not appropriate to share online.

## Building digital literacy: intergenerational knowledge exchange

Providing the skills required for broad digital competency goes some of the way toward closing the 'participation gap'. However, such competency must be cognizant of, and explicitly address, issues of specific concern to Aboriginal users. While many youth are technologically confident, their expertise in knowing how to manipulate the technology may be complicated by, and disconnected from, their ambitions to safely navigate their online public networks (boyd 2014; Katz, Keeley et al 2014). For Aboriginal youth, issues of cultural cybersafety exist alongside practices that support Indigenous knowledge exchange, including digital explorations of their culture and identity (Hogan, Rennie et al. 2013).

Being responsive to the production and consumption of knowledge is, as boyd emphasises, implicated in the 'hard work' associated with becoming digitally literate in a networked age (boyd 2014:177). Conversely, adults and those who did not grow up navigating the digital environment – so-called 'digital immigrants' – also have a lot to learn about technology (boyd 2014:180). The importance of having older Aboriginal community representatives in the workshop provided critical knowledge about sharing personal and cultural information in the digital realm. This was emphasised by Jenny, who commented that Uncle Jack Charles's Welcome to the workshop emphasised the importance of cultural protocols when telling a story:

Jenny: you need to have permission for whoever's story, or whatever mob it's from.

Further, Uncle Jack's position as an Elder provided salutary reminders of the role of intergenerational knowledge exchange among the Aboriginal community and its contribution to advancing social and cultural digital literacy.

Charlotte – [Uncle Jack's stories] were pretty eye opening, because of the way he explained he had to take initiative, and better himself in order to better his community, which was kind of ... how we feel towards our communities, we wanna be better people for our community to help them.

Charlotte's response highlights the significant role Elders play in providing inspiration and progressing pathways of belonging and cultural sustainability within the Aboriginal community. The task in future digital storytelling workshops is to further incorporate intergenerational knowledge exchange alongside technologies that promote creative content production. This includes working with Elders and artists throughout the week

to make the most of the 'innovative engagement and community building strategies' that new digital technologies allow (YAW CRC 2012; cf Third, Bellerose et al. 2014; Third, Richardson et al. 2011).

Intergenerational knowledge exchange in the digital context provides insights into the convergence between old and new knowledge systems. The digital world, as Aboriginal academics emphasise, can reinforce the concept of culture as dynamic and adaptive. This includes the capacity to reveal Indigenous histories, to reinforce knowledge of kinship connections and of culture and heritage, while simultaneously assisting individuals to 'act and think through their own specific histories, capacities and desires to build their own trajectories into the future' (Nakata 2013:142; cf Carlson 2013).

These possibilities were emphasised by participants, who juxtaposed traditional ways of telling stories using tangible material, for instance analogue photographs that can be held and handled (see Edwards and Hart 2004), as opposed to young people's acumen in using digital technology.

Nikita: I guess going [and seeing things in] the museum at the start [of the workshop] to now is kinda like a contrast between culture because you saw all the old artefacts and [then] you saw how we were using our culture in our videos but it was different to what we saw at the museum. They were hand made ... and doing dancing and all that kind of stuff.

Charlotte: [older people] they'd probably like [to tell a digital story] in a more simple way, because they aren't exposed to technology like we are... they are of a different time and age, they are more used to... scanning still images, photographs and physical stuff that they can touch and hold, they wouldn't be as used to [the digital] as we are.

Additionally, the participants were adamant that each generation could benefit from the other when creating digital stories. Young people could access information from Elders, while older generations could be guided by youth in using technology. Further, digital stories, as expressions of Aboriginal youth culture, offer potential for increased understandings across the generations.

Nikita: if we did talk to a lot of Elders we kind of get that [cultural] information and if they weren't able to use the [technology] then we could help them or we could do it ourselves and show them what we came up with. And I think that would be something that they would be proud of as well.

Charlotte: I reckon [older people] could just inspire us to express ourselves.

Jenny: I think [older people] would be able to take away a different perspective from young people's minds [if they could see how the stories were made] we could help [them] to see what we see.

Nikita: I think that also we all interpret things differently, so every generation will think of [the story] as something different and they may not even see the story as it is, but they will get some ideas as to how we saw it and why and how we represent [our stories using technology].

Adapting digital storytelling workshops to include intergenerational knowledge exchange may advance understandings of technology as a community-building resource, leading to greater insights about changing cultural, social and political interactions. Situated learning that incorporates knowledge exchange across the generations also has the potential to address reservations amongst older people about the shifting social behaviours produced by digital technologies, particularly the use of camera-enabled smartphones and SNS by Aboriginal youth, which enable communication and sharing of visual data with little or no outside control (Kral 2014; cf Carlson 2013).

## Conclusion

In this article we have considered the ethical implications of using visual methods when working with Aboriginal young people involved in a digital storytelling workshop. We have taken into consideration the ongoing effects of colonisation and the legacy of the historical visual archive in attempting to control and classify Aboriginal people according to 'white' perceptions of authenticity. In the age of Web 2.0 technology, the production and distribution of images across multiple social networks, influenced our decision to position digital literacy as an ethical imperative when working with Aboriginal youth to create new visual self-representations. Participants in the workshop trialed a range of innovative software to make unique digital stories, revealing their expertise in manipulating technology and their insightful approaches to telling stories with visual impact. However, the workshop also revealed that digital literacy is more than knowing how to use technology to tell a story, it must also be situated and contextual. For Aboriginal young people, this includes the opportunity to control their visual representations in ways that are culturally supportive, yet responsive to an ever-expanding global youth culture.

Moving forward from our experiences in working with Aboriginal youth, we can identify several areas for future consideration. Tailored approaches to digital storytelling workshops, which consider a range of options for assisting youth to enhance their knowledge of the social, cultural and political effects associated with producing and distributing images in the digital realm, would assist in supporting digital literacy. Such options include considering the accessibility and everyday use of mobile devices by young people to create and distribute images, together with using the technology in a way that assists them in developing the skills required to safely harness the benefits of digital technology. Working alongside older generations in future workshops would also assist young people to further explore and positively assert their identities and culture as contemporary Aboriginal youth, while enhancing digital literacy skills across the generations.

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## Endnotes:

- 1 For more information on the ARC LP go to <http://public-cultures.unimelb.edu.au/aboriginal-young-people-victoria-and-digital-storytelling>. For further information on Korin Gamadji Institute (KGI) go to <http://www.kgi.org.au/>
- 2 For a detailed explanation of 'shame' in the Aboriginal community, particularly its effects on the education of Aboriginal children go to [https://eprints.usq.edu.au/23010/1/overcoming\\_the\\_shame\\_factor.louth.s.pdf](https://eprints.usq.edu.au/23010/1/overcoming_the_shame_factor.louth.s.pdf)
- 3 Go to <http://indigenousvoices.cdu.edu.au/support.html>
- 4 Such workshops include those conducted with the Aboriginal community. See for example: <http://www.sistagirl.com.au/portfolio/pitcha-this/> and [http://www.koorieheritagetrust.com/collections/oral\\_history\\_program](http://www.koorieheritagetrust.com/collections/oral_history_program)
- 5 Lateral violence refers to a process of 'harmful behaviours that Aboriginal people do to each other collectively or as a group'. It is related to the effects of colonization and the result of Aboriginal people working within a system that is not cognizant of Aboriginal 'ways of doing things', (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011).
- 6 All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.
- 7 Also see <http://miyarrkamedia>.