

# Paper 3: Self-empowerment: researching in a both-ways framework

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## The both-ways research project

### Defining both-ways and translating it into Batchelor Institute practice

This project represents one small part in a much bigger picture of the work being undertaken by the Institute to understand and express the both-ways philosophy. It is recognised that this work is being done in parallel with the work being done in the Institute, on the development of understanding the both-ways 'philosophy' and on the development of cultural standards within the Institute.

The project is one that received funding through the Institute's internal research grants process and has been implemented by Robyn Ober and Melodie Bat. Essentially, the project involved an extensive literature review combined with a reflective dialogue between the two researchers using their previous experiences and professional and personal relationship as a starting point to create resources aimed at supporting the staff and students in their own explorations of this philosophy and practice.

Paper 1: Both-ways: the philosophy

Paper 2: Both-ways: philosophy to practice

Paper 3: Self-empowerment: researching in a both-ways framework

Both-ways: an annotated bibliography

Both-ways: a timeline of significant events and theories

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These resources will all be published within the Institute and the three papers published in Ngoonjook; the Institute's journal, as well as externally. 'Talking circles' will be undertaken within the Institute to broaden scope and involvement in the project and to help disseminate the resources created in the project.

## About this paper

This paper has been written as a personal and professional reflection and exploration of our ethics as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous researcher working together in the both-ways framework at Batchelor Institute. It is our assertion that for Indigenous researchers to become empowered through collaborative research endeavours undertaken with non-Indigenous researchers, it is imperative that the collaboration is conducted within a both-ways approach. This means that reflecting on and understanding the process itself must become part of the research collaboration. Research projects are not just about involving Indigenous researchers. They are about making a fundamental shift away from 'non-Indigenous researcher = principal researcher' and 'Indigenous researcher = co-researcher', about finding a new way of expressing our roles and responsibilities within collaborative efforts.

The paper will begin with a short explanation of the both-ways philosophy and what both-ways practice might be, and will then use reflections of our own practice in this project to position it within a both-ways framework. The paper will reflect our experiences as researchers against the three principles of practice that we have proposed from within the research project, *Defining both-ways and translating it into Batchelor Institute practice* (Ober & Bat 2007, p. 2). The paper concludes with a statement of ethics relevant to this work and a recommendation to review internal procedures and processes that guide research practices within the Institute, and that this work be informed by the work done on 'Indigenist research practices' as presented within this paper.

Research at Batchelor Institute will consist of projects that involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and participants at all stages. The key issues, principles and guidelines are expressed through:

- ethics and values (spirit, integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival protection, responsibility)
- protocols and procedures
- methodologies
- theoretical frameworks

- Indigenous knowledge systems
- Aboriginal and Islander involvement, negotiation and consultation
- intellectual and cultural property rights and copyright
- outcomes and negotiated agreements, such as joint ownership.

(Batchelor Institute 2007)

## **What is both-ways?**

Batchelor Institute has a philosophy of practice that has guided its work for over three decades—that of both-ways. Both-ways is a philosophy of education that:

brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity. (Batchelor Institute 2007, p. 4)

Batchelor Institute also has an underlying principle of the affirmation of self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Batchelor Institute 2007, p. 4).

Much work has been done to record and reflect on the philosophy and practice of both-ways education at Batchelor Institute over the past thirty years. In two previous papers, we identified three principles that were common across the literature.

**Principle 1: Both-ways is a shared learning journey**

**Principle 2: Both-ways is student-centred**

**Principle 3: Both-ways strengthens Indigenous identity**

(Ober & Bat 2007, p. 1; Ober & Bat 2007, p. 2)

## **The story of our research collaboration— who we are and what we learnt**

### **Who we are**

*Robyn writes:*

I am a Murri woman from North Queensland, with cultural connections with Djirribal people from North Queensland through my mother and KuKuYimithirr through my father. I am a Batchelor graduate, having attained the Associate Diploma of Teaching in Aboriginal Schools and the Bachelor of Arts in Education in 1986 through the D-Bate program, which was a combined program with

Deakin University and Batchelor College. I have taught in primary schools in remote, rural and urban contexts in the Northern Territory and Queensland. In 1989, I taught at the Murri school in Brisbane but returned to the Territory in 1991 to teach at Batchelor College. I taught for fourteen years in the Teacher Education Program, and have recently transferred to an academic researcher position with Batchelor Institute. I recently completed a Master of Applied Linguistics through Charles Darwin University and a Graduate Certificate of Indigenous Knowledge through Batchelor Institute. I am working on various research projects in my current position and really enjoy what I'm doing and learning.

*Melodie writes:*

I am also a teacher. I was born in Queensland and have lived and taught in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. I taught in remote communities in the NT and worked within the Education Department as an adviser and manager, before moving to Batchelor to work as a lecturer in education. Last year I transferred to the Specialised Publications and Academic Resource Centre (SPARC) where I work as a researcher and provide academic support. I am currently enrolled in a PhD at Charles Darwin University (CDU) and my field of research is teaching and learning. I am very interested in what I call 'relationship-based learning'.

## **What did we learn?**

### **Principle 1: Both-ways is a shared learning journey**

We are professionals with a passion for and commitment to Indigenous education that has created a strong link between us. We have been working together for nearly four years and so have developed a good connection. Through this research project, we have had to reflect on the way that we work together and on the journey that we are taking. This sharing of the journey and the making of time for reflection has strengthened the project by creating a real and honest connection between us.

*Melodie writes:*

One thing I really like about working with Robyn is the way she sometimes says things, makes little comments, that set me off thinking, and then we talk about it again a week or so later and we've got a whole new direction. This is a quality of Robyn's that I really admire. I see Robyn as a woman who is passionate about both-ways, applying what she's learning through the project to her own life and work as a researcher, continually thinking about how both-ways is developed and strengthened at Batchelor Institute.

Robyn is becoming more and more aware that she has conceptual understandings and knowledge that non-Indigenous people, such as myself, are yet to learn. She has been thinking about Indigenous knowledge systems and how links can be made to Western academic traditions. She has begun using metaphors and diagrams to explain and present the both-ways philosophy. Robyn draws on her life journey to frame new knowledge and experience. She feels strong when she is using story from her family and community. There is no doubt that we are sharing our journey together. We make time and take time to ensure that we work through things.

The opportunity to meet more often would be an advantage. With Robyn being based in Parap and me in Batchelor, we haven't met as much as I'd like to. Sharing the work load is always a challenge. I did most of the lead-in work, literature review, etc. It was my job to do that, but I also make sure that I check things with Robyn. And Robyn is very busy with the other projects that she's involved in. We're developing a good rhythm to our work.

I see myself as the battery of the work—I'm the instigator, critical reader, writer, theorist, researcher. My role is to collect, present and discuss issues with Robyn—to draft, re-draft, collate and summarise information, to be the administrator, organiser and negotiator and to do the necessary work to progress the project.

Let me tell you a short story about how Robyn and I work together. As part of the project, we decided to hold a small student forum to talk with students about what they thought about both-ways. I did the organisation, ordered the food, made the posters, printed consent forms—setting the scene. Robyn did the facilitation of the forum. The success of the forum needed both of us and we were comfortable with our roles. We talked about how we take these different roles, so it worked really well. I had the organisational skills but Robyn held the authority and credibility.

*Robyn writes:*

I have the knowledge in this area—I have worked within and lived the both-ways philosophy for fourteen years and beyond. I have the history because of my connections with Batchelor as both a student and a lecturer—I have been there when some very significant things have taken place. This gives me the space to critically analyse the work that Melodie and I do together, against this long and deep experience.

Melodie is a strong worker, thorough, committed and dedicated to the cause of this project. She is professional and brings a wealth of experience and knowledge from her work and studies, especially her work with Central Australian communities. She is a listener and

learner, respected by students and staff, respectful to others.

I feel we work pretty well together. I know we are both flexible and open to discussion and negotiation, however if there's something I feel really strongly about, I will present the rationale for my decision and hope to convince Melodie, as I'm sure she will do the same. For example, a diagram where I wanted the ropes to become closer and tighter towards the top. This was to show a tighter, new person or graduate emerging from the Institute—this could be the same for curriculum development or research. It shows a coming together and strengthening of two traditions that are firmly established.

I think our past work relationship has prepared us for this project. We are both easy-going people who are pretty much on the same wavelength most of the time.

### **Our ethics of practice**

In reflecting together, we have identified the following essential aspects of our professional and personal relationship to ensure a successful practice. Our personal relationship provides the foundation for our work. If we couldn't trust each other, then honesty wouldn't follow and much of the essential thinking and academic work wouldn't happen.

The important aspects we found were:

- respect
- honesty
- openness
- trust
- talking together
- learning from each other
- integrity
- reciprocity
- support
- validity and reliability—getting a true picture of the situation and not exaggerating or 'making up' to look good
- teamwork
- balance
- being true to ourselves, not trying to be like someone else. We have our own identities, values and skills that we bring to the team, to complement each other.

We found these attributes reflected in the Institute's values as stated in the 2007 Strategic Plan: Respect, Teamwork, Cultural diversity, Empowerment, Communication (Batchelor Institute 2007).

We also found a number of key works and academics who can advise us. One of these is Dr Karen Martin. Dr Martin, a Noonuccal woman from Minjerripah (North Stradbroke Island in south-east Queensland) with Bidjara ancestry (central Queensland). Karen has written extensively in the field of Indigenous and Indigenist research and we found resonance with the ethics she has proposed:

Research ethics: Many of the decisions researchers will face are moral ones, rather than epistemological ones, so ethical behaviour needs to occur throughout the research program. It's about gaining trust and maintaining integrity. To be truly ethical requires the researcher to recognise and respond to the duality of the research contexts and act in culturally safe ways. It expects the researcher to observe codes of ethical behaviour of his/her own professional and personal worlds, and also of the world in which the research is conducted. (Martin 2003, p. 6)

## **Principle 2: Both-ways is student-centred**

The entire focus of our research project was to improve teaching and learning at Batchelor Institute so that students' experiences are stronger. We used three main strategies to include students' perceptions, expectations and shared knowledge in the work. The first was through reading of past writings by students. The resources provided by past editions of *Ngoonjook* and *BiiteN* with their publication of student writing and articles has provided a valuable insight into the development of the both-ways philosophy.

The second was through readers who are responding critically to the papers that are being published out of the project. They gave advice and guidance. In considering who would be available and who would be the most appropriate people to ask to do this important work, we made sure to include Batchelor Institute graduates, current students and community and family members. These were the people who have been through the programs, and through life in general, and they are able to talk from experience.

The third mechanism to ensure that the project had student input was a student forum, held in April, which was a successful evening session where students came together to talk with us about what both-ways meant to them.

### **Principle 3: Both-ways strengthens identity**

*Robyn writes:*

This research project is one of a number I have undertaken in my new position as researcher for the Institute. I am developing research skills by my involvement in a number of current research projects. This has helped me to build up confidence as a researcher, learning about research methods, methodology, processes, ethics, funding bodies, etc. I am being mentored by experienced people who have come alongside me to encourage and support me. I have been able to network with other Indigenous researchers from the Indigenous Researchers Forum, held in Adelaide in 2006, where I still keep in contact with research colleagues. I recently attended the Indigenous women's conference in Brisbane—'Tiddas speak out'. This was excellent. Networks and friendships were established and are still being strengthened through phone contact and e-mail.

I feel I have a lot to offer through my work and life experience as an Indigenous educator and researcher. I have learnt to be quick to listen and slow to speak; this is part of who I am. We are all researchers whether in the work or home context. In my current position there is a sense of excitement but also fear of the unknown. There are challenges and struggles but also rewards. For me personally, research is about empowerment for our people, it is about better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, so we need to be strategic and clever about how we are strengthened and developed as Indigenous researchers.

#### **Issues identified in the research project**

In reflecting on our research project, we have found a dissonance between our own ethics of practice and the stated values of the Institute, and the research administrative systems employed within the Institute. According to the current administrative systems, Melodie is the 'principal researcher' and Robyn is the 'co-researcher'. However, we have noted that this does not truly reflect each of our roles or the importance of Robyn's role. Robyn holds important Indigenous knowledge that is central to this project. Melodie's role has been important but is not essential to the project. We complement each other and support each other well, but without Robyn's knowledge there would be no project.

Research at Batchelor Institute will consist of projects, which involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and participants at all stages.

How 'both-ways' will direct, as well as be woven into, the fabric of the Institute through its research and other practices is currently

being discussed. Further development of this topic is thus under development. (Batchelor Institute 2007)

It our proposal in this paper that as the Institute seeks to revise and establish protocols and procedures on the conducting of research, it considers the roles that Indigenous researchers play and ensures that, where Indigenous knowledge is being researched, the Indigenous researcher is given a primary role in the research and that this is reflected in a redevelopment of our administrative practices.

Another Indigenous academic who can advise us in this area is Lester-Irabinna Rigney. an Aboriginal academic from the Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri nations of South Australia. Lester has been teaching and researching in higher education since the early 1990s.

...Indigenous people now want research and its designs to contribute to the self-determination and liberation struggles as defined and controlled by their communities. To do this Indigenous peoples themselves must analyse and critique epistemologies that are commonplace in higher education. (Rigney 1997, p. 1)

Rigney gives us three principles of Indigenist research that the Institute can make good use of in the development of both-ways research protocols:

- resistance as the emancipative imperative in Indigenist research
- political integrity in Indigenous research
- privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenist research

(Rigney 1997, p. 10).

Following on from this has been the issue of authorship. Whose name goes first on the paper? Conventionally, and following the Institute's current research administrative structure, Melodie, as the 'principal researcher', would put her name first on the paper with Robyn, as the 'co-researcher', coming second. However, both of us have worked hard on the publication. We have taken complementary roles and we both work at the same academic level. In considering the issue of authorship, we found there was a dissonance between the conventional approach and our own ethics. Furthermore, this paper is one written about Indigenous knowledge and one that is reliant on the authority of the Indigenous researcher. Our decision was that this can best be established through ensuring primacy of authorship. This is a protocol that we would like to see the Institute adopt for all research projects involving Indigenous knowledge.

## Conclusion

This paper has taken our reflections as researchers and mapped them back to three principles of effective both-ways practice. Through this reflection, there has arisen an apparent contradiction between the working relationship 'on the ground' and the administration of research at Batchelor Institute. It is our recommendation that we work together to reframe our protocols and procedures to better reflect the intentions and philosophy of our both-ways practice.

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