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Language revitalisation: community and school programs working together

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Abstract

Since it was published in 2003 the New South Wales *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus* has led to a substantial increase in the number of school programs operating in the state. It has supported the quality of those programs, and the status and recognition given to Aboriginal languages and cultures in the curriculum. School programs also complement community initiatives to revitalise, strengthen and share Aboriginal languages in New South Wales. As linguistic and cultural knowledge increases among adult community members, school programs provide a channel for them to continue to develop their own skills and knowledge and to pass on this heritage. This paper takes Wiradjuri as an example of language revitalisation, and describes achievements in adult language learning and the process of developing a school program with strong input from community.

A brief history of Wiradjuri language revitalisation

Wiradjuri is one of the central inland New South Wales (NSW) languages (Wafer & Lissarrague 2008, pp. 215–25). In recent decades various language teams have investigated and analysed archival sources for Wiradjuri and collected information from both written and oral sources (Büchli 2006, pp. 58–60). These teams include Grant and Rudder (2001a, b, c, d; 2005), Hosking and McNicol (1993), McNicol and Hosking (1994) and Donaldson (1984), as well as Christopher Kirkbright, George Fisher and Cheryl Riley, who have been working with Wiradjuri people in and near Sydney. Stan Grant Snr has been a key figure in Wiradjuri language revitalisation

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since 1992 when he initiated a Wiradjuri language reclamation project guided by the Wiradjuri Council of Elders and assisted by Dr John Rudder. As part of the project a dictionary and language learning materials suitable for community members have been developed. Grant has spent many years travelling around Wiradjuri country teaching adult learners, giving the materials wide currency and strong credibility in communities throughout the region.

In more recent years some of Grant's students have gained sufficient skills and confidence to become teachers of Wiradjuri themselves. Diane McNaboe is one of these people, the next generation of Wiradjuri language developers, learners and teachers. While Grant works mostly in the southern area of Wiradjuri country, McNaboe works with colleagues and communities in the northern area. McNaboe holds a Master of Indigenous Languages Education and is a community leader who supports less experienced learners and teachers of Wiradjuri. She explains the context of language revitalisation this way:

Traditionally Aboriginal people of NSW were multi-lingual, and my old grannies, uncles and aunties from Dubbo could speak several Aboriginal languages. The main languages they spoke were Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Ngiyampaa and Murawari. These languages were almost lost within one or two generations due to the strict laws of the time with Aboriginal people not being allowed to speak their languages. My dad, Keith Riley, used to say that the old fellas would protect us by speaking in whispers and would go quiet if we came around so we wouldn't learn the language and get punished for it. My dad's older brother, Tommy Riley, could speak Wiradjuri and Ngiyampaa. He told me that when he was a little fella and got comfortable with the teachers at school he would drop into speaking in language. He said that he was punished for using 'bad' language. He didn't think he was swearing, and it wasn't until he was older that he understood that they meant his Aboriginal languages. So he learnt to keep quiet. This situation was still in place in my time, so my family protected us by not using language, to keep us safe from the *gandyibuls* (constables) or the *gandyiwias* (government men).

I've been very lucky to be born into two of the biggest family groups and also belong to two of the largest Aboriginal nations in NSW. While growing up I have been able to make comparisons among the languages and cultures of these two groups. I have made a point of chasing language and cultural knowledge from an early age. I feel the old people have been watching over me and helping me, as I have had knowledge and experiences shared with me for as long as I can remember by people from other parts of NSW (including Elders and other people throughout Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Ngiyampaa country), as well as Aboriginal people in Victoria and the Torres Strait Islands, and Kathy Marika my sister under kinship from north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. I have also learned from people in the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association and Bangarra dance group. I am only where I am today because of

the willingness of these people to share their language and culture knowledge with me. They have given me the understanding to appreciate other people's culture and the guidance to do my best for the Wiradjuri language programs. I am striving to get the sharing process happening across NSW language groups.

In recent years McNaboe and other adults in the Wiradjuri community have been involved in a growing range of language learning opportunities including the following:

- Weekend workshops and informal classes have been held in a number of towns in Wiradjuri country, for example Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, Kelso, Narromine and Parkes. These gatherings often involve community members of all ages coming together to socialise as well as to learn and share their language and culture. Some of these language learning opportunities are held infrequently depending on the time and resources of the participants, for example Wiradjuri language weekend camps. Others may be regular local events which occur on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis.
- The Aboriginal languages summer school held annually at the University of Sydney's Koori Centre, and co-ordinated by the Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, offers intensive two-week courses. It was established in January 2008 with a Gumbaynggirr and a Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay language class; Wiradjuri joined the program in January 2009.
- Certificates I, II and III in Aboriginal Language/s, developed by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW and available since 2007, provide Aboriginal people with formal qualifications and educational pathways (see Cipollone, this volume). The Riverina and Western Institutes of TAFE NSW have been notably proactive in making the certificates available at a number of campuses in Wiradjuri country, including Bathurst, Dubbo, Forbes, Narrandera, Orange, Parkes and Wagga Wagga. Grant reports (pers. comm., 10 March 2009) that the Wiradjuri Council of Elders values these courses as a means of supporting the quality of school programs and ensuring that Wiradjuri teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge.

The demand for, and participation in, language learning opportunities such as these indicates community interest in revitalising language and culture, and the importance that this holds for them (see Anderson, this volume, for example). Further, whether they lead to formal qualifications or not, language and culture programs for adults are a key to skills development and a potential source of Aboriginal community language teachers for the school programs. While Grant has been working for many years to meet with Wiradjuri people and teach language and culture, he reports that revitalisation efforts have flourished in the past couple of years through school, TAFE and community initiatives and the interaction among these programs (pers. comm., 10 March 2009). The NSW *Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW 2003a) has contributed to this growth in Wiradjuri revitalisation through school programs that add to and complement the adult learning in the community.

Syllabus overview

The syllabus and support materials (Board of Studies NSW 2003b, 2004) were developed in order to assist communities in the task of language revitalisation.

The Board of Studies intends, through this syllabus, to support the aspirations of Aboriginal communities in the revitalisation of their languages ... In order to arrest [the] decline in world languages it is necessary, among other strategies, for language-owning communities to have supportive educational contexts to assist in the process of reviving their languages ... School-based language programs are one part of the larger process of language revival. While local communities provide the primary impetus and are the main drivers, the place of schools in this larger process is significant; they can play a critical role in the revitalisation of languages across the state. (Board of Studies NSW 2003a, pp. 5–7)

The syllabus is generic, rather than language-specific; potentially any Aboriginal community in NSW can work with staff of a local school to use the syllabus to develop a teaching and learning program for their language. The syllabus incrementally builds the language and cultural knowledge and skills that the students acquire from kindergarten through to Year 10. It is similar to other language syllabuses, and is part of the languages key learning area in the NSW curriculum. The three objectives of the syllabus (2003a, p. 5) – using language (UL), making linguistic connections (MLC) and moving between cultures (MBC) – are interwoven.

Through UL students gain proficiency in one language across the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the target language. This objective is a challenge for languages in the context of revitalisation as it relies on the developing language proficiency of the teachers. Through MLC students gain grammatical knowledge and metalanguage, and compare and contrast the target language with other languages. Through MBC students build on their knowledge of Aboriginal cultures and relationships among those cultures. This objective acknowledges that language and culture are deeply intertwined and are learned and taught together. It provides valuable opportunities for learning and teaching about cultural practices and a broad range of Aboriginal knowledge, including knowledge of land, sea, rivers, flora, fauna, food and medicinal sources, seasonal relationships, constellations, kinship and family. For more detail on the development of the syllabus see Lowe & Ash (2006) and Lowe & Walsh (2008).

Syllabus implementation

The Board of Studies (BOS) advocates taking a team approach and setting up local partnerships to develop programs:

This syllabus encourages the development of long-term partnerships between communities, schools and those with linguistic knowledge of Aboriginal languages. These partnerships, which primarily support the community's efforts to revitalise language, will be enhanced when appropriate consultation processes and protocols are undertaken. (Board of Studies NSW 2003b, p. 5)

Each year the BOS works with a small number of local school–community teams to develop programs. This collaboration takes the form of regular workshops throughout the school year, over a two-year period, in order to establish a program. These are intensive workshops for a particular local school, community and language. Other workshops include a much larger number of school–community teams networking with each other, and are arranged in collaboration with colleagues in school systems³ and their regional or diocesan offices (see also Rhydwen, this volume). Content of the workshops includes team-building, linguistics and language revitalisation, local language and culture knowledge, effective teaching methods and strategies, and program writing, as well as opportunities for sharing resources and ideas for teaching, learning and assessment activities.

Prior to the development of the syllabus in 2003 a small number of school programs operated in NSW however these programs were extra-curricular; classes were often for Aboriginal students only and were held outside of the formal school timetable. At the end of 2006 the BOS NSW and NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) collected some initial indicative data (Rhydwen, Munro, Parolin & Poetsch 2007). By that time the number of schools offering Aboriginal languages programs had grown to 46. These programs were in both government (41) and non-government (5) schools for 1356 Aboriginal and 3553 non-Aboriginal primary and secondary school students. Across the 46 programs, ten languages were being taught.

Community input is essential for the integrity of any Aboriginal languages program. Communities decide if and when they want a program in their local schools, which languages will be taught and who will teach. It is the intention of the syllabus to support significant community involvement in program development and delivery:

In seeking the guidance of Aboriginal communities through their language custodians, schools can ensure that key decisions in the implementation of a school-based program are made in the community's interests and with their approval. It is a clear aim of this syllabus to empower communities to take a substantial role in the implementation of this syllabus and to assert their co-ownership of resultant programs and materials. (BOS NSW 2003b, p. 5)

A number of local Aboriginal people need to invest in the school program and feel their knowledge is respected and valued. In this way they give direction to the program as part of the process of maintaining and rebuilding their knowledge of culture and country, unique worldviews and ways of communicating. Much of this identity has survived not only in what is known and remembered of the languages but also in the way people speak English.

A school program cannot begin without an Aboriginal community language teacher, who needs to be committed to improving their language skills and knowledge, as well as developing their language teaching skills, either through gaining appropriate

³ In NSW the school systems are the NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Catholic Education Commission, and the Association of Independent Schools.

qualifications or through team-teaching with a qualified teacher of languages.⁴ While the Aboriginal community language teacher is a key to ensuring respected community participation in program development and implementation, other community members can have input into the content. Elders may not want to teach on a daily basis but still provide advice to the teachers. Others with specialised knowledge and expertise may bring their skills to particular lessons or units of work.

Dubbo College Wiradjuri program

Dubbo College provides an example of the process of developing a program which values community views and input, makes the most of current language skills in the community and builds on those skills. Dubbo College is one of the schools the BOS worked with in 2008–09 to develop a 100-hour Stage 4 course⁵ for which McNaboe is the teacher. The course is based on the following text:

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| <i>Widyunggalu-ndhu wi-gi?</i> | How are you going to live? |
| <i>Gariya yaambul yala dhulubul ya-la.</i> | Do not tell lies. Speak the truth. |
| <i>Ya-l-mambi-ya mayiny-galang. Marun-bunmi-la-dha.</i> | Teach the people. Love each other. |
| <i>Marraga-la-dha. Walan-ma-ya mayiny-galang.</i> | Hold together and empower the people. |
| <i>Marun-bunmi-ya mayiny-guwal-bang-gu.</i> | Be kind and gracious to strangers. |
| <i>Winhanga-gi-gila-dha. Ngu-ng-gi-la-dha.</i> | Care for each other. Share with each other. |
| <i>Yindyama-la Mayiny-galang-gu.</i> | Give honour and respect to all people. |
| <i>Bangga-ya-la.</i> | Cause quarrelling to stop. |

4 Aboriginal community languages teachers in schools in NSW have a range of backgrounds and experience. The majority do not hold formal teaching qualifications so they are supported by a staff member in the school who assists with lesson preparation and classroom management. Some are qualified primary or secondary teachers, and are full-time members of the school staff. A small cohort holds the Master of Indigenous Languages Education, a course available at the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney since 2006.

5 In NSW schools it is mandatory for students to complete a 100-hour course of language study. The course must be in one language, in one 12-month continuous period, preferably in Stage 4, which is one of the first two years of high school (Years 7 and 8). It is not compulsory for the language to be an Aboriginal language. The syllabus also includes the possibility of 100-hour and 200-hour elective courses in Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10).

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| <i>Gulbala-dha murraya-la marrum-bang-gu.</i> | Speak up for justice and peace without fighting. |
| <i>Nga-nga-dha garray-gu bila galang-gu.</i> | Look after the land and the rivers. |
| <i>Yandhu garray-bu bila-galang-bu nga-nga-girri nginyalgir.</i> | Then the land and the rivers will look after you all. |

(Wiradjuri Council of Elders, cited in Dubbo College and Wiradjuri community 2009)

The concepts in this text were divided into four themes that provide the focus for teaching and learning during each of the four terms of the school year. Relevant vocabulary (relating to a broad range of domains including kinship, country, health and wellbeing, relationships within Aboriginal communities and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians) and grammatical structures (including making statements, asking questions, a range of nominal suffixes, verb forms and pronouns) are taught as part of each theme, and the language content of the course becomes increasingly challenging throughout the year.

The program for Dubbo College was prepared during a series of planning meetings and writing workshops. The writing team was comprised of the Wiradjuri teacher, two Aboriginal education consultants for the NSW DET western region, an Aboriginal studies teacher (who was also studying to be an Aboriginal languages teacher at the time of writing) and two teachers of French.

After each meeting of the program-writing team, progress checks were made by the steering committee, which consisted of the school principals, Elders, local community members and the president of the Dubbo Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. This committee's advice ensured both school and community input into the program. Community input was also facilitated through many of the teaching, learning and assessment activities for the course being written in ways that required the students to make contact with community members and families. For example, local community guest speakers are a part of some lessons; for other lessons students showcase, display and perform their work for parents and families. This type of school–community interaction, with student learning at the centre, is a key feature of the program and keeps community members informed and involved in the program.⁶

Many languages undergoing revitalisation have used song as an effective way to teach both child and adult learners (see also Green; Sometimes & Kelly, this volume). Often the songs have been translations of English nursery rhymes, children's songs, folk, pop or country and western songs, all of which entail the risk of applying English stress and tone patterns to Aboriginal languages. McNaboe has begun to take what is considered by the community as a more authentic approach starting with a reworked version

6 For more detail on teaching and learning activities and examples of programs written by a number school–community Aboriginal languages teams, see the BOS NSW website at ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/go/aboriginal-languages

of 'Gulambali', a song that many Wiradjuri learners already know. The version they have learned teaches aspects of Wiradjuri grammatical patterns, word construction and related vocabulary. The song was created deliberately for this purpose and, in this sense, has an important place in the learning and teaching of Wiradjuri language structures. However the English melodic style is in stark contrast to McNaboe's version of the song, which carries not only the grammatical and vocabulary lessons but also musical patterns and gestures derived from Aboriginal languages and cultures. McNaboe believes that this song came to her through country and is also informed by her knowledge of and connections with other Aboriginal people and cultures and stronger languages. Her students respond to it very positively and believe it is more true to the language and a meaningful contribution to its revitalisation. Grant and the Wiradjuri Elders have encouraged McNaboe's approach. She plans to create more songs in this way as part of reconnecting with language, culture and ways of doing things that affirm and build on Wiradjuri identity. Wiradjuri people are mindful of decisions involved in learning their language again. They are open to hearing and being influenced by voices from the past. Older people and earlier generations still speak today and give their wisdom to language workers such as McNaboe.

Conclusion

School programs in NSW both support and are supported by the revitalisation work that has been undertaken by community leaders and others for a number of years. In the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages, school programs also play an important role in complementing adult learning. Aboriginal community language teachers are the link between the two. The development of their language skills and effective teaching strategies are keys to successful school programs. Whether in adult learning or schools, programs must have strong credibility in the community. Aboriginal people must be active agents in the process, participating in the full range of language learning, teaching and revitalisation activities and tasks.

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