



Muru Marri's Critical Friends Circle

A learning community among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate health research students at UNSW

Never Stand Still

Medicine

School of Public Health and Community

Report as at 30 September 2014

Mini-grant for project on student success

Background

Muru Marri's 'Critical Friends Circle' is an emergent learning community among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate research students in health sciences at UNSW Australia, and post-graduate students of other backgrounds also engaged in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. Muru Marri is the Aboriginal Health Unit in UNSW Medicine's School of Public Health and Community Medicine (SPHCM), which has a leadership position to ensure horizontal and vertical alignment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the faculty's undergraduate and post-graduate curricula. Since 2005, Muru Marri has hosted a small number of post-graduate research student gatherings, at which creating a safe space for sharing the experience of research, overcoming isolation and developing academic skills were identified by Aboriginal participants as ongoing needs. Due to current and expected future demand, Muru Marri has championed the Critical Friends Circle.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have low rates of participation and retention in mainstream education compared to other Australians, and disproportionately low rates of tertiary participation (Biddle, 2010). They are often in important leadership positions in family, employment and community settings, but the first of their families to attend university (Laycock Walker, Harrison & Brands, 2009). Few research supervisors are available who have experience with Indigenous methodologies or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community processes (Asmar, Mercier, & Page, 2009; Humphry, 2001) and racism still occurs at interpersonal and systemic levels in Australia's major health, welfare and educational institutions (Paradies, 2005; Grey & Beresford, 2008). Conflict and disillusionment are not uncommon experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research higher degrees students (Laycock Walker, Harrison & Brands, 2009). The

compromised social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in general is a barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students realising their full potential in education (Askell-Williams, Coughlan, Lawson, Lewis et al, 2007), and this is no exception at post-graduate level.

Despite the barriers outlined above, Muru Marri recently successfully supported a cohort of six Aboriginal health workers to completion of post-graduate public health degrees. Feedback gathered highlighted the importance of the cohort approach and nurturing of a learning community, through capacity building processes similar to those described by Chino and DeBruyn (2006, pp. 597-598), which have personal and professional relationships at their core; these:

lead to the development of individual and group skills. These skills in turn lead to effective working partnerships, ultimately promoting a commitment to the issue, the group and the process. This process creates an interest in new relationships, the need for new skills, and new opportunities for collaboration and a long-term commitment to positive change.

Commitment to capacity building through such processes in a post-graduate learning community is central to Muru Marri's Critical Friends Circle. This report will document the initial stages of this process, which draws from blended learning communities experienced in our post-graduate teaching program, the key features of which are immersive face-to-face experiences, ongoing dialogue through electronic media, and comprehensive resources and activities authentic to learning goals (Fitzpatrick, Jackson Pulver, Haswell, & Williams, 2013).

Achievements to date

1. Meetings with affiliated UNSW units and programs

Throughout 2014 Muru Marri met with UNSW units and programs to understand their strategies and plans for supporting post-graduate students and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These included Nura Gili Centre for Indigenous Programs, the Kirby Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Capacity Building Grant on Indigenous Offending, and the Learning Centre.

We shared learnings from our recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate student cohort experience, and inquired about support strategies, needs and recommendations relevant to Critical Friends.

Our meetings reinforced the need for a support mechanism such as Critical Friends, and confirmed that our work did not overlap with others, but was unique and complementary. We appreciated the ongoing need for communication and collaboration, as well as information sharing. We were offered access to resources and networks and received much encouragement.

We also gathered and reviewed UNSW resources relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health post-graduate students including from the Learning Centre, Counselling and Psychology Services, ARC and Nura Gili.

2. Critical Friends Workshop February 2014

Our inaugural Critical Friends Circle gathering was hosted in the SPHCM on 20 February. Muru Marri staff collectively drafted the invite list, consisting of 16 UNSW students and five other students connected collegially although enrolled at other universities. Nine students attended, eight from UNSW and one from a regional university. Students were diverse in their enrolment and area of health study, from one Aboriginal student who had just submitted their doctorate for examination to some non-Aboriginal students contemplating enrolling in theirs.

The workshop was opened by Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver AM, Inaugural Chair of Indigenous Health and Director of Muru Marri, and also a PhD graduate (USyd). Lisa gave an Acknowledgement of Country and spoke of her personal experience of challenges Aboriginal students face and her commitment to the Critical Friends concept. Lisa paid respects to UNSW Medicine Elder-in-Residence Aunty Ali Golding who was unavailable to be part of the workshop. We were grateful to have been able to discuss aspects of our program with her and our students' achievements. A renowned Aboriginal cultural educator we work with regularly was also unavailable. Rather than alter the workshop date, we proceeded with the gathering we had set in motion. This experience threw light on our assumption that we required external cultural leadership in this area; our experience from the workshop showed us the diverse, rich cultural knowledge and connections of all those present. The result was a dynamic, intimate and supportive environment.

Each participant spoke in turn. They gave a detailed introduction to themselves and their research question, with in depth sharing of the experience of being a researcher and remarkable learning points along the research journey. All of the intended workshop sessions were explored, including:

- Students yarning on their post-graduate journey
- Critical and Indigenist methodologies
- The academic argument, and how proposed research contributes to *both* western-science and community life
- Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

A PowerPoint presentation to guide the workshop was developed, and used where necessary. Discussion of key content occurred through students sharing *their* experience; therefore, powerfully translating and illuminating important research issues through real-world situations.

Recurring throughout the discussion was the student experience of being at the interface of Indigenous and Western knowledges. Some participants spoke of their experiences of supervision – good and challenging. Students further down their study path had words of advice on review panels, students’ rights and how to advocate. A broad range of university structural issues were raised throughout the day. In-depth discussion occurred about balancing community and family reliance, and being “the one who is perceived as being stable and competent” in that context but struggling to keep up with the various personal and professional demands and expectations.

3. Establishing the blended learning community

Participatory development: The cross-sharing between participants at the workshop was instructive, instrumental and supportive. This reinforced the usefulness of establishing the Critical Friends Circle, which is supported by evaluation data collected at the workshop. Participants also shared information about experiences with other mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholar support, affirming the need for a local UNSW approach. Statements by participants about the purpose of Critical Friends included:

People coming together, connecting

Sharing common interests in a diverse group

Developing professional relationships to continue beyond study.

In terms of participatory development, Muru Marri will continue to have a coordination role, with participants of Critical Friends sharing roles in facilitation, information distribution and

arranging gatherings. A notable feature for the program facilitators is that they are also higher degree research students and hence have an insider perspective.

Review of literature and theories about capacity building and building learning communities is ongoing, and has been incorporated into our first draft journal article, 'Building the foundations of a learning community in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research'.

Communication and facilitated online discussion: A key feature of the blended learning community proposed has been to develop social network supports that allow for dialogue between face-to-face workshops. A Yammer group was established after the workshop, with all present agreeing to try the new social networking tool. Our experience now shows that adding a new networking process to an already-busy academic life was welcomed but unrealistic, and was under-utilised. Our own ability to dedicate time to this has also been a factor. Alternative tools that are already in use have been recommended to us, such as Facebook, or an email group. We do note that the use of Yammer by the wider population of students in the SPHCM is slowly increasing. Nevertheless, since the workshop, Muru Marri has continued to have one-on-one contact between several students in person, via email as well as face-to-face. A second face-to-face workshop is planned for later in 2014.

Regular resourcing with electronic materials: Muru Marri has a large collection of electronic materials covering a range of aspects of post-graduate research, including blog sites. These were intended to be shared through Yammer, but in lieu of using this were occasionally distributed directly via email. Given the vast amount of information and connections to share, a page connected to Muru Marri's website and/or Facebook group are being considered as future options. The concern is not to overload individual students with a wide range of resources, but to consider a repository of information that can be easily accessed.

4. Resource kit

In light of the above, the resource kit has not yet been finalised. A project officer is employed to complete this task. The content is currently being drafted and includes key statements about:

| | |
|---|-------------------------|
| Welcome from Aunty Ali Golding and Professor Raina McIntyre, Head of School | Acknowledgements |
| Aboriginal health and wellbeing definition | Key moments in semester |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Critical Friends | Nura Gili |
| Using the library | Online learning |
| The Learning Centre | Time management |
| Stress management and self care | Ethics |
| Critical and Indigenist methodologies | Referencing and citation managers |
| Working with a supervisor | Complaints |
| Graduation | Resources and links |

The final form of the resource has not yet been decided. Some students are in favour of an annual student diary, including the content above, as well as monthly reflection tools, goal setting and strategies for engagement with supervisors. It may contain short stories from colleagues, which give insight into key moments in the journey, e.g., 'Getting Started', 'Who will supervise me?' We envisage the draft content being available in the coming weeks, to pilot test and decide on final format, and budget.

Other resources developed with relevance to the Critical Friends Circle include:

- An A3 poster highlighting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate health student cohort experience
- A news item on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate health student cohort experience in SPHCM's *Globe* newsletter.
- A UNSW TV 'teacher interview' on developing a learning community.

5. Draft peer-reviewed publication on 'learning community' process and outcomes

As stated earlier, draft article one is underway, about building the foundations of a learning community. A second article is planned, using data from interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate students (see below), as well as others specialising in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

Evaluation

Workshop evaluation:

Workshop evaluation forms were completed by most participants (n=7) (see Appendix). Feedback shows participants found the experience interesting, well organised and well

facilitated. Students found meeting other research students in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health very valuable. Other key responses included:

What if anything will you **take home** from this workshop or feel inclined to **describe to others**?

The need for support from other people going through a similar journey of dealing with your own struggles and finding your path.

Keep connected to others; share my experiences and troubles.

Pride at how hard we work. Pride at overcoming obstacles and maintaining a positive, driven attitude.

There is some fantastic work going on.

Research does not seem to just be about research – lots of organising and politics.

Enthusiasm and motivation.

Overall, how **beneficial** was participating in today's workshop to you, and the study and research processes you may be exposed to in the future?

| Very beneficial | Quite beneficial | Not very beneficial | Not at all beneficial |
|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 6 | 1 | | |

Is there any other feedback you would like to provide to us on the Critical Friends Circle, both with respect to today's event, or with respect to future workshops?

Be good to meet again.

Don't know much about Yammer.

Thank you.

Very good.

Keep going. Keep a strong vision for the future with developing a post-grad Aboriginal health network.

In summary, the workshop was an uplifting, inspiring and useful experience, which connected students through new relationships and strengthened existing relationships. It also provided a stronger connection to Muru Marri.

Other evaluation:

Telephone interviews with Critical Friends Circle workshop participants and others are scheduled for October 2014. Critical Friends has now been formally incorporated into Muru Marri's long-term research about the impact of its teaching practice on student empowerment. Interviews were held over until this time to gain ethics clearance by UNSW HREA Panel G (Medical and Community), which took some months. It was granted in September (HREA 2014-7-25). A Doctor of Public Health student, herself a Critical Friend, will pursue the value of learning communities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health students and will include Critical Friends.

General feedback gathered suggested the following ideas for development:

Aboriginal ways of building knowledge through art, healing and narrative

Building trust and relationships

Connecting with other groups, e.g., the University of Melbourne

Remaining connected to a learning community once studies are finished, particularly one that is mindful of the complexity of the post-colonial/colonial setting each of us is both working and researching within.

The interviews with workshop participants and others new to Critical Friends will provide a formal mechanism to gather further insights. This material is expected to be used in a second article to submit for publication. This article will build on our first planned article, which is about the foundations of a learning community in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Impact evaluation:

A key achievement during the Critical Friends establishment phase was ethics approval being granted in September to include our Critical Friends cohort within Muru Marri's ongoing study into student empowerment. A mixed method approach has been designed; the quantitative element of which involves the Growth and Empowerment Measure (Haswell et al. 2010). Our plans to collect the baseline of this two-arm measure are in development.

Muru Marri has a small but growing dataset of students' self-assessed empowerment and wellbeing levels. Group level analysis of these data suggests that the GEM is both valid and sensitive to change for use in this context.

Sustainability:

Since 2012, there has been a clear rise in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments across all UNSW's public health degrees including Graduate Certificates, Masters and doctorate levels (DrPH and PhD) (Table 1). From 2009 to 2011, annual enrolments ranged from two to three, whereas between 2012 to 2014 there have been at least seven and up to 15 each year. The number of successful completions has also risen, with six graduates in 2013 alone – and of the six, three have commenced further study at UNSW.

Table 1 Indigenous student enrolments, UNSW Medicine, 2008-2013

| | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Undergraduate | 18 | 18 | 30 + | 38 # | 47 | 54 |
| Postgraduate | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 8 |
| Research | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 8 |
| TOTALS | 23 | 21 | 39 | 47 | 59+ | 77+ |

+ 230 students overall # 253 students overall

These figures, and the feedback from the February 2014 workshop and informal discussions since, have clearly established the need for the Critical Friends Circle.

Our vision is for the Critical Friends Circle to form the hub of a more diffuse community of practice of Muru Marri alumni. We have the commitment of our unit's director to ensure this work becomes germane to Muru Marri achieving its strategic goals in learning and teaching. We are already seeing areas of specialisation develop that will form the focus of the community.

As this program develops, sustainability will be achieved by:

- *Training students as learning community facilitators:* We already seeing informal mentoring relationships developing between participants. This will further be shaped by the students who are submitting their thesis this year having more time to contribute, to which several have already committed. As students become empowered themselves in the research process they are more likely to have influence on others and in challenging workplace, community and university structures.

- *New members regularly joining:* Several in the group have just started their research journey and are identifying ways to network and have their questions answered. Anecdotally we are hearing of other potential participants for our next workshop.
- *Updating resource kit materials including through student contribution:* This is an iterative, relational process, seeking input from participants through a two way exchange of ideas and problem solving. We hope to access further funds to support resource development and distribution.
- *Ensuring evaluation data is gathered, analysed and distributed:* A significant step towards this is the formal inclusion of Critical Friends into Muru Marri's ongoing research, and developing a structure to ensure this happens in a systematic way, with ethical clearance.

Conclusion

This report detailed Muru Marri's Critical Friends Circle progress to date, and plans in place for the future. This report shows we have made encouraging progress in the core domains of blended learning community development, despite expected time constraints and resource limitations. It shows our 2014 workshop evaluated very well, gave timely and local insights into the needs of students, and was a powerful, nurturing experience that has lead to enhanced relationships between Muru Marri and students involved. While some between-student mentoring and relationship development is taking place, our evidence is anecdotal at this time. The Critical Friends Circle will continue to develop, with another face-to-face gathering planned for later in 2014, and facilitators have been nominated to guide this. Our resources are taking shape and the addition of a project officer to our team will allow the continuum of concept design through development and testing to be realised. Our communication strategy is the least well developed element and will require more work in investigating and trialling of modalities. Critical Friends has also been formally incorporated into Muru Marri's long-term research about the impact of its teaching practice on student empowerment.

“...building the capacity of Indigenous people, communities and organisations to do health research and use the research for practical, positive change means being serious about building quality training and offering real support for Indigenous researchers”

(Mick Gooda, in Laycock, Walker, Harrison and Brands, 2009, p8)

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Appendix

Workshop feedback is summarised below:

| | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. How interesting did you find the workshop? | | | | |
| Very interesting | Somewhat interesting | Not very interesting | Not at all interesting | |
| 7 | | | | |
| 2. How valuable did you find the opportunity to meet other research students ? | | | | |
| Very valuable | Somewhat valuable | Not very valuable | Not at all valuable | |
| 7 | | | | |
| 3. How relevant was the workshop to supporting you in your current research task? | | | | |
| Very relevant | | Somewhat relevant | Somewhat irrelevant | Very irrelevant |
| 6 | | 1 | | |
| 4. How would you rate the organisation of the workshop? | | | | |
| Very good | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| 6 | 1 | | | |
| 5. How would you rate the facilitation of the workshop? | | | | |
| Very good | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| 5 | 2 | | | |