Yarning up Indigenous pedagogies:
A dialogue about eight Aboriginal ways of learning

Tyson Yunkaporta and Melissa Kirby

Tyson (opening the yarn): So Sis, we’re having this yarn now, both of us sitting in different places but looking at the same image. Then there are others, sitting outside our circle, listening in on the yarn (reading). This yarn will appear as a chapter in a book on two-way education, a chapter about the eight-way framework of Aboriginal pedagogy that came out of our work and research in western New South Wales over the last few years, as we worked for the Department of Education and Training and I ran the research project through James Cook University.

This chapter will be a yarn rather than an essay, because this is a more appropriate and effective way for us to share and convey this knowledge. This is because the narrative and yarning modalities of our oral culture have been the keys to our thinking, learning, doing, knowing and being for many thousands of years. The western academy shouldn’t have a problem with this ‘written yarn’ genre as an emerging form of Indigenous academic expression. After all, their own higher learning traditions are grounded in the same thing – Plato and all those original ancient Greek thinkers used to write their scholarly works as dialogues. If this kind of interface between oral and print modes is the foundation of western thought, then as teachers and students we should engage with it, particularly in this age of information technology when the means of communication demand this kind of interaction once again. The fact that these western dialogical forms, both new and ancient, are a good match with our Aboriginal yarning modalities – well, that’s just a bonus.

As we acknowledge the old people from the European tradition, we also acknowledge the old people from our Aboriginal traditions, the ancestors and elders from where you’re speaking in western New South Wales, and those from where I’m speaking here in the far north of Queensland, and then out to all the other places where we both have kin and ancestral ties, including South Australia and Victoria. We acknowledge the old people everywhere that this yarn goes. We pay our respects to the keepers of knowledge in New South Wales who own the pedagogies and the knowledge we are talking about today. And I acknowledge you, Sis, as one of the key custodians of the knowledge produced by the interaction of these pedagogies with the mainstream education system. The protocol we follow in this work is, ‘If you take something, put something back.’ This means that anybody who uses this knowledge to find
new solutions and innovations should share those things back, and make sure they sit within
the Aboriginal community, for the benefit of that community.

**Melissa:** I often make that late night phonecall to my well respected Aunty for a yarn,
needless to say they are not short yarns. The yarning is informal and the narrative can often
be a series of events. It can be said that we all yarn in some respect at any given time; however,
real and authentic yarning usually takes place with people whom you respect and trust. It’s
overwhelming how yarning is a transformation for oneself. Often we hold these thoughts,
processes and images in our head for days just to have that one important yarn. How is it
we can retain so much information? Looking at the eight-way diagram for this chapter, on
page 207, the boomerang, the story-sharing element is the starting point for memory, and
for conversation in any shape or form. It works for us, and it works for our students whom we
教。It’s not just about the sharing of stories for amusement; it’s our way of keeping abreast
of current happenings and managing our dynamic but eternal connection to Country. There
are structures, rituals, protocols and codes for yarns that vary in their particular details from
place to place. But these are grounded in common patterns and purposes we all share.

The Gamilaraay people in Walgett would say ‘yaama’ to begin a sentence or ask a question.
Similarly, our mob in Bre [Brewarrina] have used ‘aye’ for many years in our yarns. Even
in communities where the traditional language is no longer fluent or spoken regularly, we
assert this Aboriginal English to maintain our ways of knowing that are connected to certain
patterns of language use. Growing up, I had to think about my actions when I said ‘aye’ often.
For example, if I said, ‘Mum we saw Aunty down the street aye?’ this was accompanied by
a nod and eye contact, or other non-verbal signals. These non-verbal ways also represent an
important vehicle for passing on knowledge and learning. Non-verbal actions combined with
language help convey a deeper understanding of the message we are putting across aye?

During my yarning with my Aunty, a long utterance usually ends with ‘... aye Aunt’
or it could start with ‘Aye Aunt ...’ This is a respect marker, showing my wish that Aunty
approves what I am saying and we may continue to converse. So throughout this written yarn
here I will end with ‘aye’ or start with ‘aye’ in several places, for it is my way of establishing
relationships during an oral yarn and story sharing. I am coming alongside you with this
knowledge from my ways of knowing.

**Tyson:** True ay (but I spell it and say it a little differently). So yes, it is from this place of
respect that we’re putting this yarning modality up there alongside the written academic
genres, walking our talk by showing the sophistication of our ancient ways and their
relevance to modern research, development, education and technology. Having mastered the
academic language and forms of the dominant culture, we have the skills and confidence
now to bring our Indigenous cultural ways out of the glass boxes of display and performance,
out of the dusty corners of anthropology and linguistics. No longer are these relics or exotic
entertainments, but living culture, informing the way we interact with print culture and
global knowledge economies.

And really, this is the core of the Aboriginal education philosophy we’re bringing to
this dialogue — bringing culture into the ‘how’, not just the ‘what’. We’re talking about our
ways, not our things. We’re learning through culture, not just about culture. We are studying
outsider knowledge using our own ways — not studying our own knowledge using the ways of
outsiders. In this way, the need for Aboriginal perspectives is not an academic impediment,
but an opportunity for us to gain a competitive edge in mainstream education. Mastery of both ways allows us to assert the relevance and new applications of our own ways.

Here is the image we are yarning through (figure 12.1), which is the pedagogy model from our work, yarins and research with elders, teachers and keepers of knowledge in western New South Wales.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 12.1: The eight-way framework**

To begin with, this yarning way of learning belongs in the 'story sharing' part of the diagram, which is not about Dreaming stories as token content, but our way of sharing yarns and stories, which is a distinct pedagogy all on its own. All these eight pedagogies – they aren't about Aboriginal knowledge as content, but Aboriginal knowledge as processes. And our key pedagogy is narrative-based. These stories aren't just one-way either – they involve substantive communication back and forth.

**Melissa:** Then there are the kinds of yarns that throw you completely out of the water. Our backyard at the family home in Brewarrina is a place of serenity, a place to relax and just be grounded. While grounded and feeling at home and among family members, my father sits quietly and nods his head while I am yarning, often giving a sign of approval. If and when I speak out of place I don’t see the signs as much, but usually I know from his actions during our yarn to keep in my place. As a family we have engaged with story-sharing pedagogy processes from an early age – we become attuned to this way of doing things without being conscious of it, learning through culture way. This is the kind of understanding we need to bring our listeners to in this yarn. For this we have the diagram, which helps us structure the learning here and bring them into a space or a process/journey that can be visualised as clearly as I can see my own family backyard there in my mind’s eye.
TWO WAY TEACHING AND LEARNING

Tyson: There now – that is story, and there is a lot in it about our Aboriginal non-verbal pedagogy (which is represented on the diagram). You also mentioned your family’s yarning place and suggested the diagram as a substitute for this learning space in our written yarn here. This is a good idea. Having this image at the centre of our yarn helps us to honour the symbolic referencing that has always been a cognitive strategy for our peoples.

Knowledge is coded in signs, symbols, images and metaphors that can be both drawn and imagined. This is a tool for learning and memorising complex knowledge. The ‘symbols and images’ pedagogy on the diagram deals with this encoding of information as visuals, but the other one, ‘learning maps’ deals with the use of visualised images for processes rather than data. So, this would relate more to planning an overall procedure, narrative or journey, rather than memorising specific facts. But of course, these two are connected because one provides the structures of memory while the other provides the language of memory.

None of these pedagogies exist in isolation, and they’re not ‘learning styles’ you can assign to a student like an astrology sign or personality type. They are dynamic and interrelated, like all our knowledge and ways of thinking. This is because our cognition is relational, meaning everything is related to something else. For example, the length of something is seldom just ‘b’, but longer than ‘a’ and shorter than ‘c’, and similar in length to some other ‘b’ measurement that we know well through shared (and storied) experience. This relational, comparative, holistic reasoning is reflected in the diagram in the ‘non-linear’ pedagogy on the right.

Holistic thinking and relational cognition are also grounded in kinship and landscape referencing, through which all knowledge is connected to people and place – elements that are represented on the diagram as ‘land links’ and ‘community links’. In addition, a holistic orientation to learning and knowledge means initially focusing on the whole rather than the parts – seeing an overall meaning, purpose and structure first and then breaking it down into manageable chunks. That pedagogy is what we’re calling ‘deconstruct – reconstruct’. This is why I’m introducing all the pedagogies on the diagram early on – we’re walking our talk in this yarn.

What we’ve had so far is a kind of metayarn – yarning about the yarn. So now that we have that overall picture of the topic in our minds (our learning map), and we have positioned it within a context of family, Country, procedures and protocols, now we can talk around those eight elements and discuss each part in more detail as we go ay.

Melissa: I sit for a while looking at the diagram; today I see the spirit of knowledge in the learning process. I continue to think about language, lore and landscape. It is the real-life Indigenous link we have which assists us in the way we see the logic, the way we see the diagram. Some come to the knowledge far more easily than others, but all should take care and take their time. These epistemologies allow for self-reflection as a person, not just as an educator. It’s not something that happens all at once – there are necessary steps and we must be patient with this process. Following protocol and local law means you respect Country and the people who lived before us, as well as those who sit alongside us. My special education students knew how to do that.

There was a time when the class had a cultural visit to the local ancient fish traps, a special significant place, and a funny thing happened. The students were unusually well-behaved, sitting and listening to the voice of the river. It was like they transformed. The class and even the unit of work had links to the land, and it was like we were all travelling
upstream as the water trickled through the rocks. It was a spiritual connection that overcame all of us, and even entered the curriculum. This is an important part of that ‘non-verbal’ pedagogy; so it’s not just about gestures and signals and kinaesthetic learning. It’s also about that unspoken spirit of learning, the revealed knowledge that lies in our bodies and in the land. This non-verbal pedagogy is always identified by elders who see that hand symbol on the diagram as the central and most important way. It involves deep self-reflection and concentration. It is important to take things slowly at this stage of the learning and ensure that this personal connection takes place.

Tyson: Yes you’re right, so I should try to slow it down and situate the yarn better. People following this yarn might notice that we have spent nearly half our allotted time/space just in establishing the yarn and situating the learning in terms of people and place. This is our way. But it is hard to do in mainstream education, because most of what we study is presented in a way that is disconnected from Country and people. There is no context of land and community for all those memorisable facts floating around in space. So I think that a good way to slow down and connect the listeners or readers to this knowledge now would be to talk up ‘land links’ and ‘community links’ as pedagogies, and show how to implement them as daily Aboriginal perspectives in learning. First up, in our way, the first questions we ask are, Who are you and where are you from? This is because you can’t learn or know anything without linking it relationally to people and place – that’s community links and land links. So, who are these people listening in on this yarn, and where are they from? They might ask themselves those questions.

Melissa: My phone is running hot this year with phone calls from agencies inside and outside of education enquiring about the eight-ways framework and if it can be used in their departments. I ask where they have heard about it and from whom. The response is usually a vague reference to ‘word of mouth’, and then straight up they insist to know all about the diagram and if I could possibly explain quickly what it all means. In my standpoint and foundation of lived experience I can’t explain lived culture in haste – it wouldn’t be respectful; nor would it be authentic.

Tyson: True ay. So often people ask for it to be explained in 25 words or less, or to have a quick training session. But our knowledge doesn’t work like that. You have to engage as a related person belonging to a place. How can you do this if you’re living in a virtual world with no connection to the land and no idea of who you are, beyond your consumer preferences and personality traits? So many teachers say to me, ‘I don’t have a culture – I’m just Australian.’ And apart from vague romantic notions of brumbies and billabongs, they don’t really identify any of their knowledge as being connected to place or land. It’s only when they dig a bit deeper and start engaging with our Indigenous ways of learning that they find they have a rich culture, a valid connection to place in their own right. It is through this engagement with the ways of the peoples and places in the land that they can forge strong, productive relationships with both their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Here’s a story for you. One group of teachers told me their local elders group had approached them with the eight-ways framework and asked them to implement it in the school. The journey they went on from there with those elders needed no explanation or training from us – they independently explored with those old people all the eight elements in relation to local land and community. And on this journey they found their own identities as
well, making them better equipped to finally introduce themselves properly to their students and community. They now knew who they were in relation to people and land.

**Melissa:** There is so much knowledge that comes from the land, and the eight-ways diagram is a great prompt for me and others to express this knowledge within a cross-cultural dialogue. These ways have been used for millennia to impart knowledge – both local and non-local, grounded in systems of land and systems of family that still shape our thinking and ways of learning today. This is why the eight-way diagram itself is based on a kinship system. Some teachers see how the lines connect around the diagram but not at the top and bottom, which makes them curious. The reason why the diagram can’t be explained over the phone in haste is due to the relationships that are being acknowledged in those connections. The pedagogies in the diagram are all relational. This gives me depth in the way I do things, the way I think, feel and learn. You don’t have to understand it all right away – just be looking, comparing, thinking. Everyone can bring their own cultural perspectives alongside this eight-ways diagram in a process which builds on identity in relation to place and people.

**Tyson:** That’s it. In our research we have found that people don’t have to be Aboriginal to come to this knowledge, or to use Aboriginal perspectives to anchor mainstream learning in real-life community and land contexts. Additionally, being Aboriginal doesn’t mean you can automatically do this either. This is something we work on from both ways, through dialogue and ongoing negotiation, bringing the school into the ‘real world’ of people and places.

I can’t stress it enough – the importance of this connection to people and land in our ways of thinking and learning. It doesn’t come through a class project on ‘Aboriginal sporting legends’ or ‘traditional hunters and gatherers’ either. That’s still standing on the outside looking in. The mistake there is that Aboriginal perspectives have been confused with Aboriginal themes. A genuine Aboriginal perspective can bring Aboriginal community and place-based learning orientations to the study of mainstream content, no matter what the theme is. So never mind bolting on a lesson on hunting and gathering if you are doing a unit on food production – rather, embed a local place-based approach to learning throughout the whole unit of work.

At a basic level, you might incorporate the cultural concept of an Aboriginal sense of direction into both teaching and classroom management. Once your students understand directionality as a key part of Aboriginal place-based cultures, you have an Aboriginal perspective in play every time you ask them to ‘look west towards the whiteboard’, or to ‘face up at the south door’. If you are teaching about crop rotation in Britain, it really does help just to be able to point out the direction of that island to the students, so they know they’re learning about something real, from a real place.

It might be useful to examine the land and community contexts of that island and compare these to the local ones. The class might analyse the similarities and differences between the two land management systems to make judgements and propose solutions to local problems of sustainability. This way, any Aboriginal knowledge of land is included for its true value and relevance to Australia’s future, rather than being treated like a stone-age relic inserted as a tokenistic nod to Aboriginal perspectives. And in your mainstream content, you are constantly reinforcing the intellectual benefits of an Aboriginal worldview in the way you are referencing Aboriginal directionality and place-orientation as part of an optimal learning process.
It's hard to explain this, and it's hard for some people to 'get it'. It's easier with children—they ask me what culture is and I say it's being like your place, and they just 'get it' right away—learning ways to think and act from your land and from any other place you're interacting with. With adults it's trickier, and they don't 'get it' so easily. This makes me think we might have gone the wrong way around here, yarning from 'story sharing' to 'land links', without explaining the connection (which is where the deeper pedagogy lies). Have we gone off the track here?

Melissa: The feeling is overwhelming when you 'get it', and often we approach different tasks from different angles; we take the long way around to just 'get it'. The long way could just mean we are in that dynamic interface, exploring our ancestral ways and looking at the western way of doing things also.

Tyson: True. You've brought us to that 'non-linear' pedagogy on the diagram now too, which teachers need to understand before they can see the way everything connects. The non-linear way is joined back to story sharing and land links for a reason. The way we move through narratives and through landscapes is never in a straight line—it winds, it curves and it goes around. These non-linear ways of learning also include synergistic or both-way processes—like you said, that interface between different cultural ways.

Just as opposite forces, beings and elements interact in nature as a process of creation, different knowledge systems and domains can interact in a process of innovation. In this way, a song might help you remember a mathematical procedure, or a science experiment might inspire a work of art, or maybe the creation story of the first didgeridoo might provide a template for ethical design processes in a technology class. (See I'm going back around now to offer more about how to do story sharing too.) When we start thinking in this non-linear way, the possibilities of two-way and both-way approaches to education are limitless. We see the connections between things, rather than just the divisions.

Like in the diagram, we can see that non-linear pedagogy is connected to story sharing and land links, which also both connect to the one we call 'learning maps'. This is quite simply the act of planning a process in a visual way. I know people think we are traditionally not big on planning ahead, but I question that myth. I know from our old people how things are planned out, how procedures and journeys are memorised like vast internal landscapes, visualised plans that are (and always have been) shown as images drawn, carved or painted. Traditionally these are done on things like message sticks to be used as memory aids, or even just drawn on the ground when plans and ideas are explained. This ability to plan holistically, using symbolic referencing systems, has been the source of our vast adaptive capacity and creativity—cultural traits that have enabled our society to thrive through massive cycles of climate change over tens of thousands of years. These ways of thinking and planning are our great gift to a world that desperately needs solutions in an increasingly complex and unstable time. Unfortunately this gift has not been accepted yet, or even noticed. Maybe this is because people are still only interested in artefacts from our material culture, which they see as part of a primitive past rather than part of a dynamic and innovative present.

Melissa: We still do this visualised planning today, only in many more forms than before. Non-Aboriginal people can do this too. Educators and managers who engage with this kind of planning with their students and employees find their work is enriched and made more transparent for their organisations and communities. We are calling these visualised plans
'learning maps' because most English-speaking people can figure out what they need to do if they really think about these words for a while.

Even the eight-ways diagram itself is a learning map. I've found when teachers actively engage with the diagram they have to take a quantum leap into changing their way of acquiring knowledge. When we plan, just like when we yarn, time doesn't fly like an arrow - it turns like a wheel backward and forward. I've observed many teachers approaching their visual learning maps in this way, backwards-mapping through their units of work from the final assessment piece to develop an overall image of their planning. It frees them up to engage with our ways of knowing and being, even our non-linear view of time. The past and the future always spill in, informing present tasks in a productive way. By mapping out our plans we can change our journeys. It can be refreshing to step out of linear time, allowing for greater depth to differentiate or modify our learning processes. This is how our holistic worldview can be transformed from a fascinating but limiting cultural difference into a real intellectual advantage in mainstream education.

**Tyson:** Many people have described Aboriginal 'holistic worldviews', but only as a point of difference or deficit in education. Until now, little has been offered in terms of the applications and potential contributions this way of knowing can make to the global knowledge economy. The purpose of Aboriginal education research seems to be to name and describe differences and deficits and then figure out who to blame for the dysfunction - the system or the culture. For us, our research journey has been different. Rather than focusing on labelling the 'what', we've been seeking the 'how' of Aboriginal pedagogy in a collaborative effort between the education department and the Aboriginal community. On this journey it has become clear to us that there are common points of intersection between the pedagogies of different cultures, when you start examining the 'how' rather than the 'what'. So what does this mean for us? Yes, sure, we're holistic thinkers, but how can we use that to our advantage?

**Melissa:** Aye, we've missed one last pedagogy that is all about holistic thinking. That's the deconstruct-reconstruct part of the diagram, with the symbol of the drum, which answers that question of how to use our holistic thinking in education. This pedagogy is all about seeing the big picture at the start of a task, watching first, seeing somebody model the learning for you. In our culture we watch first, then copy what we've seen our teacher do. Then we can try things out independently, balancing self-directed learning and teacher instruction. Really, this is no different from the best available western pedagogies of scaffolding, zone of proximal development and so forth. Therefore, there shouldn't be a cultural mismatch between western pedagogy and Aboriginal pedagogy, if the best pedagogies from both ways are used. That's because the best pedagogies are the same no matter where you're from. Only the slack ones are different and irreconcilable. I once used our Aboriginal deconstruct-reconstruct pedagogy with my special education class, and they finished up doing better in their writing tasks than the mainstream classes. Each task everyday was a learning experience; they were learning directly from the demonstrated knowledge by taking whole texts and deconstructing them, then purposefully putting it all back together. My Aboriginal pedagogy was a perfect match with the task analysis approach we use in special education, and a perfect match with the school's literacy scaffolding approach too aye.

**Tyson:** I see this work as an act of reconciliation more than anything else. Respect is more than tolerance and inclusion - it requires dialogue and collaboration. And when we bring our best and highest ways of learning together, we find that we connect at a truly deep
and productive level. Like for example, your mum put together that behaviour management framework based on Ngemba sacred sites ay – bringing that higher law-way knowledge alongside the school rules and behaviour codes.

**Melissa:** That’s right, she built a learning map for the school rules based on symbols of different places along the river at Brewarrina. It’s the school’s official behaviour management framework now. So for example, she used Sandy Bank as a symbol of safety, because that is a place that has local significance around child safety. My grandmother brought a tear to my eye last year when she visited her daughter’s classroom to see the eight-ways pedagogies in action. When my mother explained her methodology around the class rules from her standpoint as a local, she acknowledged Nan for a good upbringing on the river and my grandmother responded:

They were good times living on the river, it was a struggle but you kids had so much to do, play in the gullies, go swimming and fishing and most of all live life hard and tough to appreciate all the good things you have. Right now, you can still spend time on the river and in nature but now you have to show your children how to play safe, and the Sandy Bank is the symbol for safety in your rules. That is good.

**Tyson:** So to really respect and include Aboriginal perspectives, they can’t be just added on as extra content. It has to come in at higher levels, like pedagogy, behaviour management, organisational structures, school policy. A lot of our knowledge at this level is implicit and unrecognised – it’s not really something that our people think and talk about explicitly, especially in the company of outsiders. We need to be able to bring this knowledge to the front of our awareness and develop metalanguage to explain it and utilise it in cross-cultural contexts.

**Melissa:** Yes, getting an education means becoming conscious of what we don’t know; however, it can be said that we also need to become conscious of what we are already familiar with, what we see already, what we feel already. Our ways of knowing, being and doing. It’s all there ay – it’s inherent. Aboriginal pedagogy is the catalyst and beginning for bringing it out, for creation and innovation by learning through culture. It all makes sense ay Tyson?

**Tyson:** And that’s a good place to end this yarn I think. Creation, innovation, culture. We close now by acknowledging and thanking our old people for keeping this knowledge and giving us our roles for working with it. We acknowledge their generosity in inviting non-Aboriginal educators to engage with this knowledge to enrich their professional practice and lived experience within Aboriginal land and communities. That’s it.

**References**

8 Aboriginal ways of learning <http://8ways.wikispaces.com>