

ARTICLE



'Around the Meeting Tree': methodological reflections on using digital tools for research into Indigenous adult education in the Networking Tranby project

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ABSTRACT

The authors reflect on the methodology of using digital tools to learn about the experiences of Indigenous people enrolled from 1980 to 2000 as adult students at Tranby, an Indigenous-controlled post-secondary college. This collaboration between Tranby and the University of Technology Sydney drew on debates in post-colonial studies, oral history and archival studies. The authors found that participants prioritised personal control in all social media communication and engaged most actively in person-to-person communication to take part in this research. Participants were eager to share memories of student experiences but they have preferred to contribute to online publications which focused on activities, rather than on individuals. To support participants' desire for control over digital communication, the authors slowed the pace of online outcome development to allow flexible and ongoing consent arrangements along with non-custodial approaches to oral, archival, photographic and material collections.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous; adult student experience; interviewing; social media; digital research

From the time that Tranby opened its doors in 1957 as a learning place for adult Indigenous people, its great strength has been the person-to-person interactions which took place there. Students came to know and trust each other, teachers learned from students as much as students learned from teachers, and both learned from the visitors and activists who came into Tranby to talk and plan. Those networks of learning, confidence and ongoing communication gave this project its name: 'Networking Tranby', which aimed to learn about students' experiences at Tranby from 1980 to 2000, the first decades of Indigenous control.

Debates around memory, learning and history have been unsettling historians and archivists for some time. Indigenous, colonised people are challenging the telling of history and the management of archives, not only in Australia but internationally.¹

The complex history of Tranby has shaped the way its story has been told and the type of archives it has kept and cared for. These, in turn, shaped the development of this 'Networking Tranby' project, an ARC Linkage partnership between Tranby and University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

History

The Co-operative for Aborigines is an adult education body established in 1957 by the Reverend Alf Clint, a former shearer, Australian Workers' Union member and High Anglican priest, under the auspices of the Australian Board of Missions (ABM). Alf had previously worked for the ABM to establish cooperatives to support Indigenous communities' economic and political independence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and in Queensland. He had been supported in this role by left-wing members of the High Anglican Church, including Bishop Edward Burgmann and others. Its new home in Glebe in Sydney was in a building called Tranby, which gave the Co-op its name. It had been donated to the Church by the Reverend John Hope, a priest at Christ Church St Laurence, nearby, with the intention of forming a basis for cooperative training for Indigenous people from Australia and the Pacific, some of whom also trained in apprenticeships and were mentored by trade unions. As a cooperative, Tranby had a Board of Directors, including Aboriginal people from various parts of Australia but also members of the ABM, union representatives and supporters including lifelong stalwart, Justice Robert Hope, a nephew of the Reverend John Hope. Financially, Tranby was supported by the ABM and unions but also by charity button sales.

In 1980, the role of General Secretary passed to Kevin Cook, a Wandandian man and former Tranby student who had until 1975 been an organiser for the New South Wales (NSW) Builders Labourers' Federation. The Tranby Co-operative reorganised its Board's composition to mandate an Aboriginal Chairperson and to have a majority of Aboriginal members, although the remainder of Board continued to be union representatives, educators, church representatives and other supporters. Under Cook's leadership, and in a period of increased federal funding for Aboriginal initiatives, Tranby expanded the courses it taught on-site, to include courses in basic skills, business studies (incorporating cooperative studies) and tertiary preparation. At the same time the Co-op took on consultancies to provide adult training in rural areas throughout NSW and in other states, initially in relation to the new requirements demanded by the NSW Land Rights Act 1983 and later the recommendations of Royal Commissions and Inquiries.

Government 'education and training' funding came at a cost. It was short term and had many strings attached, increasingly requiring (in relation to some courses run at Tranby) conformity with officially provided curricula. Full accreditation would later achieve more reliable funds but locked Tranby into narrow subject structures and reporting requirements.

Throughout the period from the later 1970s to 2000, Tranby was also home to a number of organisations or political campaigns which held meetings at Tranby or to which Tranby sent formal representatives, for example the Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights (from 1978 and continuing), the Campaign against Black Deaths in Custody (resulting in the Royal Commission, 1987 to 1991) and the various campaigns in support of the liberation movements of Southern Africa.

Kevin Cook retired in 1997, after which the position of General Secretary became that of CEO, later held by Jack Beetson, Oomera Edwards, Lindon Coombes, Kristy Masella and others. Today's CEO is Dr Belinda Russon and Chair of the Board is Kristy Masella.

Tranby's published story

There are a few analyses of Tranby's history. Some are by labour historians such as Lucy Taksa, Nikola Balnave and Greg Patmore.² More substantial was *Making Change Happen*, a book by Kevin Cook, Tranby General Secretary (1980–97), co-authored with Heather Goodall. This traced the movements in which Kevin was involved throughout his life, with particular attention to the Tranby Co-operative. As General Secretary, Kevin always regarded Tranby as a site for political activity, which he saw as being a necessary dimension of its educational role.³ There are furthermore a number of media accounts, the most extensive being the 1985 *Canberra Times* article 'Tranby College: The Aboriginal Soul in the Heart of Glebe'.⁴

Even fewer accounts describe the experiences of Tranby's many students, either at Glebe or in its far-flung regional and interstate teaching venues. Only three published sources discuss student experiences at Tranby. The first two discussed student work as well. In the 1994 book by Andrew Dewdney and Sandra Phillips, *Racism, Representation & Photography*, Dewdney wrote about students in the photography class he taught there with Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop. Both Bishop and Dewdney considered visual production as an important alternative communication form for students who have had many difficult experiences in formal schooling, much of it around literacy, leading to their complex struggles as adults to master the specific literacy skills required for academic writing. Another brief research study was done in 1999 by Debbie Durnan and Bob Boughton which looked at outcomes for only one cohort of Tranby students in comparison with those in other colleges.⁵ The third considers the personal experiences of students: the excellent 1993 *Other Boundaries* by Diana Plater draws on memories from a broad range of Indigenous communities across inner-city Sydney, including Tranby at Glebe.⁶

Archives

With its rich history, Tranby has generated different types of records. For many years these records were kept in the office or, haphazardly, in various rooms of the old Tranby building. Their condition improved greatly with the employment of Julia Mant, an archivist, between 1999 and 2004. Julia gathered and catalogued the organisation's records, conserved those which had been water-damaged and wrote a successful grant application to the Centenary of Federation fund, enabling the digitisation of the Alf Clint papers, the oldest and most vulnerable in Tranby's archive. Mant has continued to advise Tranby on its archive, including her assistance with Tranby's 50th anniversary celebrations. The hard-copy records are now held in a dedicated room in the new buildings at Tranby while the digitised Alf Clint material is on the Tranby server.

These archives held at Tranby are not a 'community archive' in the sense that Andrew Flinn in 2007 or Jimmy Zavala et al. in 2017 have discussed, that is, bodies of materials collected by a single community organisation to conserve its history or sustain its identity.⁷ Nor is it closely associated with any one locality. On the other hand, these are not government archives, enacting discriminatory policies, although some Tranby archives may well reflect the formal conventions of unions, churches

and cooperative societies! There are many Indigenous people to whom the materials in the Tranby archives are important, including the dispersed body of former students as well as the participants in the many hard-fought campaigns which drew energy and support from the Tranby staff, students and broader supporters. What can be said is that the archives held at Tranby are complex, multi-authored and with varying known provenances. All of their communities of interest regard those archives as being of high significance.

Among the organisational records are agendas, minutes and business papers of Tranby Co-operative Board meetings, consultancies and papers about the general running of Tranby as an organisation, including its extensive renovation program in the 1990s. Many archives are associated with the political organisations and campaigns supported by Tranby, the meetings of which were often held at the Tranby Glebe site and which might also house their records. Media clippings and photographs about Tranby and the many aspects of the work undertaken there, along with gifts from communities to Tranby and awards won, are also held there. All these records, photographs and artefacts have, in theory, been accessible to the public with the approval of the Tranby Board but, in practice, the space and staff available for access have both been very limited.

But there are as well many archives associated directly with the teaching of courses – some of which were gathered to acquit federal or state funding and some later generated as an outcome of the running of courses accredited to the NSW or federal education departments. In addition, there is a body of student-created works, such as photographs and essays, which are the assessment items of various courses run at Tranby that were not directly funded or accredited by state or federal governments.

The Tranby Board ensures all these records are confidential – as are all similar educational documents – available only with the consent of the student involved. Tranby staff draw on them to better manage current teaching and ensure information flows to alumni. Some of these records from 1980 to 2000 are in hard-copy files and others, usually specifically those relating to the government-funded or accredited courses, are digital files.

While the above student records are not available to the public, there are also a body of student-produced Year Books or newsletters, which been published in hard-copy form, although never digitised. These have been circulated widely, not only to students but to members of the Board and more generally to interested supporters. This body of student-created material has therefore already been made publicly available although its hard-copy format now makes it difficult to access.

The project

To address the lack of records about student experiences in the early decades of Indigenous Australian management of Tranby, this ARC Linkage partnership aimed to answer two questions which provided useful information for Tranby – Questions 1(a) and 1(b) – but also addressed a serious gap in Tranby's history – Question 2.

These project goals were:

1. To draw **de-identified** information from the confidential records of courses:
 - 1(a) the places of origin of Tranby's on-site students. This would demonstrate that, as former staff and students stated but for which there was no accessible, consolidated empirical evidence, Tranby had always drawn students from interstate and internationally, as well as in NSW. Tranby wished to test and confirm this view.
 - 1(b) to record anonymously any information on the reasons former students had for withdrawal from enrolments at Tranby. This would assist Tranby in better meeting student needs in future.

The second goal was:

2. To research and document student experiences while enrolled at Tranby during the first decades of Indigenous management.

It was assumed that this would have been a wider experience than simply the courses, important as they may have been. To fulfil Aim 2, the project team hoped to undertake a series of oral history interviews with former students about their own experiences and activities at the time. Social media was expected to be one way in which digital means would be used to contact and inform participants in the research. As well, the project would research Tranby's archives for records of student involvement in the many activities which took place there.

The oral histories recorded were to be transcribed and both the audio and transcription to be returned to the interviewee for checking and for their approval for any use. Only those sections of either transcript or audio approved by interviewees were to be used in any exhibitions or online. The audio and transcription were to be lodged in the Tranby archives with access conditions controlled entirely by the interviewees.

The project team

Each of the project leaders has had long interaction with former students of Tranby. Heather Goodall is a historian of Irish and Scottish Australian background now at UTS but who taught at Tranby in the early 1980s. Heidi Norman is a Gomeri community member and historian at UTS, where she has taught many former Tranby students. Belinda Russon is an Indigenous research lawyer with family ties to southeast Queensland who taught Legal Studies at Tranby and has been the CEO there since 2013. In addition, a number of research assistants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, worked on the project in interviewing and archival research.

The members of this project team were all active Internet users, through Facebook and other software programs. We knew that former Tranby students, like many Indigenous people, were in touch with each other and a wide range of friends using these same digital networks.⁸

Our digital toolbox

The three key components of the project in which we expected digital tools would be useful were: (1) the Interview – as well as social media for communication, we were to use digital audio recording to record, edit and store our interviews with students about their experiences; (2) the Database – to organise the information about student places of origin and years of enrolment; and (3) the Internet – to disseminate our research outcomes. We found strengths and weaknesses in each, which led us to modify our plans. These will be discussed below, but first we want to point to the intellectual debates which both informed and problematised our work.

In each of these three components, our study drew on the broad literature from post-colonial studies, oral history and archival work. The ethics issues in any research related to Aboriginal people are prominent. Linda Tuhawai-Smith, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Martin Nakata, Lorina Barker and Tracey Banivanua-Mar have each raised issues of the ethics and politics of research on and with Indigenous people in colonised Oceania.⁹ The ethical issues they raise have been grappled with by archivists in their developing collaborations with Indigenous scholars, as has occurred in the Trust and Technology project.¹⁰ These ethical issues are consistent with those pointed out concerning oral history by Alistair Thomson and Alexander Freund.¹¹ The common thread in all of these analyses, although it is pursued in different ways, is the need to recognise the power of the past. Research needs to be seen in historical perspective, as does the interview itself, which has developed in particular political and cultural conditions.

Research, for example, has frequently led to increased control over and invasive interventions into the lives of colonised Indigenous peoples, as each of these analysts has pointed out. For this reason, there are now stringent protocols around the formulation of any research project in Australia funded by bodies like the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and universities where Indigenous voices have been able to influence research policy. During this project, this concern about research was prominent: both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers found former students to be cautious about any research, regardless of who was conducting it.

In addition to the problem of colonial power, there is the fact that European colonisation frequently impacted on peoples whose bodies of belief, history and law were held in oral forms, rather than in writing. Colonisers invariably dismissed such cultures as ‘inferior’, so there has been little attempt among Europeans to understand the complex meanings, multiple genres and diverse performative modes of oral traditions. Yet a hallmark of orality in most cultures is its collective and collaborative nature – while often enabling innovation, oral genres are always *performed for audiences* who may have greater or lesser roles in correcting or shaping the performance. So the individualised life story through personal narration – so favoured by contemporary ‘oral historians’ and so readily transferred to digital platforms – may be discouraged in oral cultural expression. This has raised serious question marks over how any recordings of ‘oral history’ might be understood or trusted among oral cultures.

The issues around both trust and culture have been addressed by Lorina Barker, an Indigenous researcher from northwestern NSW, in her 2006 paper “‘Hangin’ Out” and

“Yarnin”¹² Barker reflected on the experience of collecting oral histories among relations and points to the importance of cultural differences in transmission of life stories and memories in Indigenous settings in contemporary Australia. An underlying basis for such reflections has been the recognition that oral genres are important means of communication of both overall histories and community knowledge in all non-literate societies. These oral traditions shape the informal ‘yarning’ about the past and life histories which might occur in Indigenous societies in Australia today. There is a valuable body of literature on the many genres of oral traditions in non-Western societies, including those in the Pacific, in Latin America and in Africa and the argument is developed further in recent work on Australia.¹³

Recording memory in oral histories has therefore been welcomed by many historians because it seems to offer a way out of the rigidity of the written archive. Yet interviewing as a tool has a troubling history. Alex Freund argues that the interview arose in Western cultures in imposing the discipline and obedience which resulted in the confession in the Catholic Church and, in parallel, the ‘confession’ in criminal legal proceedings.¹⁴ In both cases, the interview has been a key tool in exercising invasive control. This has been the ‘discipline’ to which Foucault referred in his influential book, *Discipline and Punish*. Following these arguments, ‘story-telling’ – the building and delivering of one’s memories as a ‘story’ that has a narrative form and structure – is never a neutral process. Instead, it is a complex interaction not only between interviewer and interviewee, but between the power exercised by the wider society on individuals and the corresponding individual power to shape one’s own ‘story’ – in a form and with a purpose with which one can live. This set of processes, complex enough already, is further complicated in colonial conditions, in which continuing power is being exerted by the dominant society to reshape and retell that individual ‘story’ so that it fits into the wider ‘story’ that conforms to and justifies colonialism. Alternatively, as South African historians have suggested, power may be exerted by victorious liberation movements to narrate all lives as if they had been resistant to the former colonial processes, leaving some people feeling pressured to tailor their memories of achieving survival through anonymity so that they could be narrated as if they had been heroic resistance.¹⁵

Finally, there is the ubiquitous presence of contemporary media, in which personal reminiscences and interviews are widely depicted in both fiction and non-fiction. How has all of this, as Alistair Thomson has asked, shaped the ways that people think about memory and personal narrative, let alone how do they now choose to shape their lives into a story to be retold?¹⁶

The interview

This project encountered ethical dilemmas despite being led by experienced researchers who had worked extensively with Indigenous people in earlier projects. It was necessary to re-evaluate research strategies continuously. All involved saw the project to be a way to record and recognise the experiences of the people who were often overlooked – not only as Indigenous people but because, as students in a learning institution, they may have felt they had little power relative to staff or administrations to have their views heard. No pressure was to be exerted on any potential interviewees to take part, and

they could withdraw at any time or modify any content in their interviews. A copy of the audio and transcript of each interview has been returned to the interviewees, who are invited to edit the transcript and to identify which parts, if any, of the audio file are to be preserved. The edited sections are then to be housed in the Tranby archives but accessed, in line with AIATSIS protocols, only on meeting any restrictions imposed by the interviewee.

But once the project was underway, our plans needed revising. We had hoped that Facebook would offer a useful channel to make contact with former students, but ethical concerns meant that from the earliest stages, although our Facebook page was 'public', we limited posting to administrators only, inviting people interested in being interviewed to contact us by a separate email address. This inevitably limited interactivity and spontaneity, but concerns about potential harm from indiscrete postings about personal histories were too real to be ignored. The need to ensure adequate time for participants to review their interviews made for long delays in outcomes. As a result, the Facebook strategy has been slower and so less fully developed than we had hoped it might be. So recruitment of participants for interviews more often arose from word of mouth initiated by the research assistants and investigators along with current Tranby students and staff.

Another aspect of our interview planning needed revision. Despite being enthusiastic in talking and hearing memories about Tranby, both Indigenous research assistants and former students were reluctant to proceed with recorded interviews. Hesitation to be recorded is common among non-Indigenous interviewees, for reasons like unfamiliarity with audio technology or the commonly expressed feeling that their story is not out of the ordinary and so 'no-one will want to hear it'.

Yet reluctance to proceed to interview was so persistent in this project that it really demanded further reflection. There are particular problems around Linkage or Partnership projects, the Australian Research Council's strategy for encouraging research which will have practical outcomes of benefit to specific public or commercial sectors, designated as 'partners'. Even when the organisation is an Indigenous-controlled public body like Tranby about which most Indigenous participants expressed strongly positive attitudes, there was some fear that 'lives will be turned into commodities' in the 'partnership' process.¹⁷ So while funding bodies like the ARC may love 'partnerships', we found that the potential participants were less enthusiastic.

More often, participant concerns arose from their scepticism about research generally, even research being conducted by other Indigenous people. As discussed earlier, this has arisen from the 'over-researching' of Indigenous peoples, seen by most as reflecting – at worst – intrusive colonial goals of intervention and – even at its best – seldom leading to any benefit for the Indigenous people participating. The result is 'Distrust in the Archives', as McKemmish, Faulkhead and Russell have pointed out.¹⁸ Finally, those who had been students at Tranby over these years, 1980 to 2000, had attended many classes about critical analysis of the media. So it would not be surprising if, from that alone, they had become familiar with the exploitative and racist nature of most mainstream media.

There has been valuable work done on the use of social media among Aboriginal people. Carlson and Frazer record the role social media can play in allowing people of all ages to take part in mourning rituals despite now living far distant from family.¹⁹

Rice et al. have reviewed an extensive number of papers about social media use by young Aboriginal people.²⁰ Yet while their conclusions suggest that there may be a valuable role for social media in research, it is notable that each paper they cite as demonstrating active use is an analysis of situations where Aboriginal people themselves initiate online interactions in order to sustain social or kin networks. This review in fact suggests that young people's usage is for very specific purposes and usually those in which the users have a strong sense of control. So this is NOT in fact an indication that independently initiated 'research' will be embraced by Indigenous people, even when it is conducted by an Indigenous organisation. It is instead an indication that questions of power and control are of critical importance in any Indigenous social networking interactions.

Overall, the cautious approach of former students meant we conducted fewer interviews than we had initially expected. This was balanced by the depth of the interviews that were done. One Indigenous research assistant led a significant proportion of all of the interviews. As a Tranby student herself, this researcher brought an empathetic and encouraging conversational approach that led interviews into unexpected directions. The outcomes were rich, in-depth and fascinating interviews that opened up insights into experiences at Tranby that would simply not have been visible without this gifted Indigenous interviewer. This generated one of the strengths of the use of the interview method.

The cautions around interviewing led, however, to another strength in the interview element of the project, by limiting the pace in which research outcomes could be communicated by Facebook or other means. Sheftel and Zembrzycki have cited Milan Kundera in his accusation that the speed generated by modernity was aimed at destroying memory.²¹ They argue that taking time to listen carefully to interviewees' stories, to consider not just the units of information but the narrative forms, the silences and the affective interactions with the interviewer and others, all ensure greater understanding and more complex and valuable representations of the person and their memories. So 'slowness' is not an inefficiency of earlier methods of recording and transcribing oral histories, but rather a defining strength.

Our slowness was partly a result of the project planning in that we had aimed at ensuring that interviewees could exercise control over all editing and presentation of their stories. As well, the unexpectedly modest pace of the interviewing ensured that the later stages of the project would unfold more slowly than predicted. We came to see this as a benefit, not a limitation.

Our initial products from these interviews were two hard-copy exhibitions for the local community around Glebe, composed of A2 posters with photographs and quotes from the interviewees. One was done for NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee) in July 2016, and was shown in six locations around Glebe, including a polling booth for a by-election being held that day, a Community Youth Centre and the local branch of the City Library. The other was for Yabun Festival, 26 January 2017, and was shown in the 'Yarning Tent' to accompany the annual Kevin Cook Lecture. In this year, the Hon. Linda Burney, Federal Australian Labor Party Member for Barton and former educator, introduced two young Aboriginal people, Kali Bellea and Dr Talila Milroy, who had used further studies and tertiary education to achieve their goals. The small scale as well as the limited audience and

circulation again proved valuable. It meant there was plenty of time for both interviewees and researchers to discuss transcripts and possible quotations and photographs.

Each exhibition was shaped by a project topic, which meant that there was analysis and selection by the project team as well as discussion with interviewees on what they wanted to contribute to that topic. The first topic was around 'neighbourhood', and it explored the way in which Tranby and its students, although drawn from across the country, related to the immediate locality of the College in Glebe. The second was about 'teaching on Country' and it investigated a series of Tranby excursions, with former teaching staff explaining what they had hoped to achieve with this method and former students explaining what – if anything – they had got out of it. The preparation of these exhibitions offered many opportunities for revision, which occurred right up until the final moments of installing the posters – and, in some cases, afterwards! Posters are easy to take down, revise and replace.

The problems of these exhibitions were however exactly these limitations of scale – the audiences who could see them were relatively small and so the discussion of these stories was limited in time and space. The Internet seemed to offer a far more effective life for these rich memories. As we discuss in section three, we found in relation to the Internet too that there were weaknesses with our planning as well as strengths in what we hope to do.

The database

The goal in developing a searchable digital database organised around individual students was principally to provide information for Tranby about the origins of its students. As a Linkage project designed specifically to bring rigorous research to bear to benefit the 'industry' partner organisation (in this case Tranby), all researchers, including assistants, were subject to the strict ethical requirements of Tranby to retain the confidentiality of all student course-related records.

Former students and staff believed that Tranby had always drawn enrolments from across Australia and the Torres Straits and, prior to 2000, at times from PNG and the South Pacific. The database was aimed at testing this belief. In addition to the origins of students, however, Tranby wanted to better understand the challenges faced by Indigenous students which might lead to discontinuation of courses and withdrawal from the College. As well as the ethical concerns of breaking confidentiality on student records, there was a reluctance among research staff to include information about particular challenges faced by applicants such as substance abuse, domestic violence or poverty. Anxieties about whether this might reflect poorly on the individual or even on the area's Indigenous community were expressed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. In order to address this concern while enabling Tranby to identify the challenges students faced, a carefully anonymised version of the database was established in which such information could be conserved but would no longer be associated with identifiable individuals.

As discussed earlier, the Tranby archives held two types of records. One was the set of digital records of students arising from funding bodies' requirements to record enrolments and attendance in courses. These records were organised around specific courses over a year, semester or term. Information on any one student, therefore, might

be present in a number of digital records. This made figures on overall student numbers hard to access. More importantly, such digital records had no information about student origins or other issues like reasons for withdrawal.

The other type of record was the hard-copy folder created by Tranby staff for most students on enrolment between 1980 and 2000. These folders included documents associated with each student's enrolment as well as – sometimes – other documents like student essays or artwork, course reports or references. This body of folders, arranged in alphabetical order, contained duplications, absences and confusions for a number of reasons, such as variations in spelling, alternative surnames or use of nicknames and there were, on occasions, cultural conventions requiring name changes, such as after a community death.

The project's non-Indigenous Research Assistant was allocated the task of entering content from both these types of documents into a FileMaker® database, designed by the investigators and organised by individual student name. Each student had a single digital file into which was entered each enrolment and the data on place of origin and the other data which was gathered at enrolment. A check-box recorded whether the student had been interviewed or not. A notes field allowed indications of whether other material was present in the hard-copy folder, such as course reports, student work and destinations after graduation. Information on causes of any early withdrawal was recorded in the anonymised version of the database.

Although initially straightforward, this methodology showed weaknesses as we progressed. First, the categories of information entered on enrolment differed from year to year – partly as a result of changing government requirements (such as new rules demanding that applicants choose whether they would be identified as 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' – but could not be both, nor Australian South Sea Islander) or changing Tranby policy – such as whether applicants were asked to write about their goals and/or their background. Second, there was diversity among applicants or staff members about how completely the form should be filled out – so for some applicants there were many blank spaces while for others there was a great deal of accompanying background information.

The key issue for the project was the origin of the students – but although there were boxes on the forms for this information, it was often recorded only indirectly, perhaps by reference to earlier schooling or by surname and family references. This latter particularly necessitated consultation among research assistants – not only between non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff but among Indigenous staff from different areas. It often needed experiential local knowledge even to suggest whether an applicant was a member of a family from a particular area or whether a shared name was simple coincidence. There was as well a wide diversity among student folders about what had been included about course outcomes or later destinations. So it was not possible to develop a consistent database.

Finally, for the Indigenous interview participants, there was an uneasiness about the idea of a database being developed at all. Even though the project was a partnership with Tranby, the database had been designed to exclude confidential student results and the interviews themselves had little direct input into the database entries. It was simply that databases have a chilling potential to record and link disparate forms of information and utilise it in unanticipated ways. This was simply too reminiscent of the bitterly

resented colonial interventions in the lives of so many Indigenous people – whether to refuse exemption certificates or to remove children or to withhold welfare payments.

The strength of this component of the research has been in its results – it has allowed Tranby for the first time to demonstrate the nationwide range of its recruitment. This has been depicted visually in mapped form which is accessible on the Tranby website, to be drawn on whenever needed to demonstrate the historical continuity in Tranby's role as a national education and training provider. This map also suggests the networks of connection and relationships which led to batches of enrolments and so have powered the outcomes of Tranby – strengthened by living, interactive, people-to-people relationships.

Using the Internet to communicate the interviews

Expectations of many researchers and curators working with oral history now are that interviews will be uploaded in full or part to the Web. Funding bodies like the Australian Research Council and many others encourage online dissemination. Sherna Berger-Gluck, a leading historian in using digital resources for feminist oral history projects, has reflected recently on her own practice. She has recognised that as people's life circumstances change, material that they consented to have circulated or published in the past will become problematic for them and they will need to withdraw their consent. Berger-Gluck now works in continuous review with each interviewee whose recordings are disseminated on the sites she has developed, although even this cannot solve problems if online recordings have already been misappropriated and misused.²²

The arguments for continuous review or continuing conversations between communities and archivists, as well as historians, have been productively discussed in a number of important works arising in the field of the archive, including that of Andrew Flinn, in relation to the UK, and of Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead and Lynette Russell, in relation to Australia.²³ While the potential for flexible management of oral history recordings and other records may be facilitated by digital methodologies, the strategies for doing so need to be carefully thought out so that control is retained in the hands of the interviewees, community creators or carers of such records.

Drawing on Berger-Gluck's experiences in the US and on their own work in Canada, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki argue that online dissemination inevitably undermines the degree of control which interviewees have over their own story and even their own voices. They develop a cogent argument for caution in using the Internet for dissemination or analysis.²⁴ Alexander Freund similarly cautioned that rising popular fears of identity theft and misuse of oral history recordings and transcripts are well founded.²⁵ None of these historians is suggesting that digital technologies and online dissemination should be abandoned. They are, however, calling on historians who are advocates of oral history – and particularly those who have explored gendered memory – to be just as critical and analytical about digital tools as they have been in the past about the broader assumptions of oral history. Only in this way, they argue, can they sustain their commitments to collaborative and democratised research relationships in which authority really was shared. To achieve this in a digital environment may require

significant effort and commitment to counter the pressure of the technology and its advocates.

The Internet appears to offer the benefits of speed – in analysis (by ‘clipping’ or ‘indexing’ audio not text) and accessibility (by making audio and interpretations widely available). Yet these benefits, Sheftel and Zembrzycki argue, are illusory. Citing Kundera’s bitter accusation that the speed of modernity is aimed at killing memory, they point out that speed will remove the great advantages achieved by oral history in its current form of empathetic and detailed listening to interviewees’ voices. This ‘slow listening’ allows not only ‘indexed’ or ‘clipped’ units of information to be amassed, but the wider meanings of whole narrative structures to be recognised. Silences can be attended to and reflected on. Revisions can be made and authority can be genuinely shared. The promised ‘accessibility’ of online dissemination only occurs where interviewees and others have the technology, the knowledge – and the electricity – to access the Internet. Those who have the least income, the least resources, the least digital literacy and the least technology (including reliable electricity) will be shut out even further from the processes of making history. So, in fact, the ‘accessibility’ of the Internet is achieved only for those who are already privileged.

Such concerns have led us to reconsider online dissemination in two elements of our project – the database and interviews. We had initially expected that a form of this database would be available online to all to locate names of former Tranby students with their generalised origins (that is, state and region, for example northwest South Australia). Even though this would have made minimal information available, it now seems inappropriate that even this information might be made public. The project will therefore now offer the database only to the Tranby administration for purposes of improving information to its alumni, as initially agreed. Further detailed consideration by the Board will be needed before the database, even in its minimal form, can be made accessible in a password-protected situation through the Tranby website.

In the second redesign of the project plan, we have decided that an online form of the project results is appropriate but that it will no longer focus on individual life stories. Instead, it will be a collection of small and accessible items – a form adopted in most Tranby publications to date, more like a scrapbook than a conventional monograph. Like the exhibitions, this website will display the *activities* of Tranby in which students were involved, rather than making interviewees’ own life stories accessible. In this way, there will be substantial time for the interviewees to edit their transcripts and audio, to be stored as planned as well as to identify how they would like to contribute to a discussion of the various activities to be included. But it will not make any former student vulnerable to present or future embarrassment or information misuse.

The visual metaphor for this project results website will be an image designed by a student and adopted with permission as the Tranby logo over this period, although it is no longer in use for the whole organisation. This image is ‘The Meeting Tree’, a painting done in the early 1980s by Tranby student Billy Wilson from Bourke, which will offer the title for the project website, *Around the Meeting Tree*.

This website will be composed of a number of elements. There are many photographs, taken by press and some donated by students for this project, which give an insight into the events around Tranby. As well, there will be a series of brief analyses of

Tranby activities involving students. These will be short, plain English and accessible essays, between 500 and 2000 words each, co-authored by various combinations of the research team with acknowledgement of the contributing interviewees.

Five of these short essays will outline the origins of Tranby (that is, the 'roots' of the Meeting Tree) and the remainder will depict the various ways those foundational ideas have 'borne fruit' or 'taken flight' with students' involvement, as well as indicating where further research might be done. These essays are now in the planning stages and will include essays on the Heritage Sites course and its origins, on the Aboriginal Development Unit (in which some former students were employed) and in activities like the Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights, which was initiated by Tranby and in which some students took part as staff or as unionists themselves.

Another element will include the digitised Tranby *Newsletters*, which have been already published in hard copy but not until now digitised. It is expected that these will offer an insight into the student body and courses available over the two decades into which the project has been inquiring and which will be analysed in the website's essays.

The items in the newsletter and the images accompanying the short essays will include some students' names and their photographs, with their permission. The items will not, however, follow the course of the oral history interviews or display any one student's 'life story' as may have been our initial expectation.

In many ways, the 'Around the Meeting Tree' website will be an illustrated guide to the records held in the Tranby archives. Dr Sonya Pearce has contributed significantly to recent renewed attention to these archives as a resource for Indigenous communities and academic researchers.²⁶ While a formal guide was developed some years ago, this online website guide will also offer a narrative about how these diverse bodies of material came to sit together in the archives at Tranby – why they were created, how they were put together and how they came to be in the care of Tranby. This is not unlike the 're-describing' which Tolly Bradford has discussed in relation to Canada and which Nampombe Saurombe considers useful for decolonising archives and the narratives of history in South Africa.²⁷

Findings and recommendations

The Networking Tranby project always aimed to emphasise the students' experiences and particularly the person-to-person interactions and networks which Tranby had fostered. We expected that digital tools would play a significant role in all aspects of the project, from interviewing to online dissemination. However, findings from our research and from relevant literature have led us to reconsider some of our plans.

Despite this research project being in partnership with Tranby and including Indigenous chief investigators and research assistants, we are strongly of the view that the recent discussions between Indigenous peoples and archivists, as well as the reflections of historians working in oral history, are important in how research is conducted in oral history and archives. These discussions are particularly important in how online dissemination of results and ongoing care of research materials are approached.

We first list these findings and then suggest recommendations.

Digital methodology findings

Interviews

- *Widespread social media use by Indigenous people* – and particularly young people – is occurring in conditions of strong personal and community control. This reflects well-founded suspicion of research in colonial conditions. It is *NOT* an unqualified indication that social media will facilitate research unless it is under direct participant and collective community control.
- *Individual focus* was generally distrusted by Indigenous interview participants and by Indigenous staff, despite widespread interest in and enthusiasm for the research goals. The collective and collaborative preferences of Indigenous oral cultures are one source of this unease.
- *Recruiting interviewees*. Social media was less successful than expected. In addition, privacy requirements reduced interactivity. Most participants were contacted through word of mouth and ‘snowball’ networks of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.
- *Recording*. Consistent with above, while former students were often eager to participate in expanding and conserving the histories of adult education at Tranby and elsewhere, they were also often reluctant to be focused on as individuals through recording interviews. Participants were much happier to talk off-recording than to be recorded and to talk about activities in which they took part rather than their individual life stories.

Database

- *Information consistency*. As with all small organisations, the data in archives was varied.
- *Area of origin*. Despite – or because – origin is such an important part of Indigenous social and personal identity, it was often only implicit on forms gathered by Tranby. It could at times only be learnt through word of mouth discussion between researchers and then by discrete inquiries by Indigenous researchers through their community links.

Web publication and digital dissemination

- *Widespread Indigenous use of Internet platforms* does not allay reluctance to participate in individually focused outcomes.
- *Caution about loss of control* over personal narratives with web-based presentation are widespread and legitimate in historical and contemporary terms.
- *Eagerness for news and history*. There was nevertheless significant eagerness to hear news of other students and about activities in the past at Tranby.

Recommendations

- (1) *Slow pace*. We have slowed the pace of our oral history gathering – or had it slowed for us. The benefits of slow and responsive oral history gathering allow us to redesign our project in consultation with Indigenous interviewees and Tranby staff. This allows continuation of use of digital tools with high degrees of control by participants through reshaping of outcomes.

- (2) *Control, care and community purpose.* Indigenous participants' interest in control over digital tools and research materials should be recognised and supported. Tranby has responded by developing a program of digital student journals which will enable digital archiving but provide strong personal protections. Open-source digital platforms like Mukurtu (<<http://mukurtu.org/>>) may enable conservation of narratives and histories while ensuring strong security protection. Staff in Jumbunna, the Indigenous Research and Learning Centre at UTS, are investigating the appropriate use of such platforms and are advising on the further outcomes of this project.²⁸
- (3) *Flexible consent.* Continuing communication to ensure accessibility of consent modification is needed. There must therefore be content flexibility in any resultant website so that if consent needs to be altered or revised, material can be easily removed or protected.
- (4) *Researchers.* It is valuable to maximise Indigenous roles and responsibilities – that is, ensuring real power-holding and, where appropriate, skill development – in interviewing, analysis and design of outcomes. This project has found considerable value in having a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, as it has ensured the widest range of information came into the project. The skills and knowledge of professionals, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, have been valued by Indigenous participants. Nevertheless, the role of Indigenous researchers has been critically important in all aspects of this project.
- (5) *Database.* All database reports and visualisations (graphs, maps) should be carefully anonymised to ensure privacy.
- (6) *Online dissemination* should focus on activities and networks, rather than on individual life stories. In both online narratives of individuals and activities, continuous consent communication and related flexibility in web content design are essential.

Reflection

Rather than tracing the individual life stories of former students, we will be focusing on the many and varied activities associated with Tranby – ‘around the Meeting Tree’ – in which students were involved. We will be drawing on our interviews, our archival searching and our database analysis and will as well be in ongoing conversation with interviewees. We hope to be able to contribute to a valuable record of student involvement in a range of learning activities that are often overlooked in the more formal records of ‘Aboriginal Education’. More broadly, we hope this project may offer opportunities to further explore – at Tranby and in many other settings – flexible care relationships between historians, archivists and interested Indigenous communities.

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