

Reflections on Monday 15/3/04—Helen Verran

I am interested in the social life of data-bases in Aboriginal communities. In trying to tell that story I found two little stories from Monday useful. One was the story about the work Yingiya is doing with the digital material his brother has assembled as short videos about Mirrngatja. The other was the story Gary told about his work in finding out about which Balanda institutions have data bases of indigenous knowledge.

Bryce told us the story of what he and Yingiya are doing this week, and now I'm re-telling it, and I hope I've got the gist of it right. I understand that Yingiya and Wangurru and Bryce are looking at and listening to some short video clips that Yingiya's brother has made. In terms of a data-base we could say that this set of video clips is a data-set. This data-set could be the beginning of a Mirrngatja data-base worked through a map-interface.

And as they look and listen to the video clips, Yingiya and Wangurru and Bryce are recording what the experience evokes. So Yingiya tells another story which is recorded. So the original 'data-items' that Yingiya's brother recorded are both now richer and more complex, because they 'sit next to' another digital file. But how do we see and talk about the *relation* between the video clip Yingiya has just recorded, and the one his brother made? Do we have a different data-item now? Or is Yingiya's another data-item? Does it matter how we manage the *relation* between them?

How do we come up with a data-base that can relatively easily 'do' this sort of *relational* performance of knowledge in indigenous contexts? And what does the fact that we need to do this say about the social life of data-bases in Aboriginal communities?

Gary's story about the work he has been doing in making an 'audit' of data-bases of indigenous knowledge held by Balanda institutions, raises some similar sorts of questions. It helps us see some useful samenesses and differences between the ways Indigenous communities 'do' information, and the ways Balanda institutions 'do' information. Gary had the job of ringing up specific people that he thought could tell him about the data-base held by a particular organisation. Of course it was

difficult finding out exactly who to ring, and then actually getting them on the phone, but when he did he got a story about the data base.

The story the person on the other end of the phone line told did not add to or alter the data-items in the data-base they were talking about. But their story was the process of the becoming some data-items in a data-set Gary was making. Gary's small data set—information about digitally encoded information, is in the process of becoming digitally encoded. It can be understood as in some ways different from, and in others, similar to the small digitally encoded data-set that Yingiya's brother has made about Mirrngatja.

In making his report Gary could account a story of the institution, and show his work in getting the information as an accompanying data-item, or as part of the data-item. But I recognise that this is seen as odd and unnecessary. Is it going to be useful to do this, we ask ourselves. With respect to Gary's work I think we need to be able to show indigenous people where data is held in the Balanda world, and tell some sort of story about the form its held in for two reasons. Indigenous people need to be able to find out if and how this information might be of use to them, and second they need some explanation of why the Balanda institution has it and wants to keep it.

Thinking about how to usefully tell differences between these small data sets—the one that Gary is putting together, and the one that Bryce is helping Yingiya and his brother put together—but also how they are the same, might begin to get us somewhere in telling a useful story about the social lives of data bases in Aboriginal communities.

Reflections on Tuesday—Helen Verran

What is a knowledge centre? It's related to other questions. What is a data-base?' And what is a data-item, and what is meta-data?

Stories we heard on Tuesday helped me think about these odd questions. David Murtagh from NT Library and Information Services told us about the work that NTLIS are doing working with three Community Knowledge Centres, and then we heard from Mark Grogan and Maree Klesch from the Wadey Knowledge Centre, which is one of them. The

three knowledge centres have “champions” —small groups of committed, hard working, and resourceful people who have amazing perseverance. Mark and Maree told stories about the huge amount of ‘stuff’ they have. That the knowledge centre is related to a language centre, and a museum, and how this complex of projects is used by people in Wadeye.

Later we heard from Yingiya that in many Aboriginal communities there is hot controversy and disagreement over whether that community should have one. That’s good. It reminds me of the very productive disagreements around Garma Maths at Yirrkala during the 1990s. We learnt a lot from those disagreements. They helped us see what was at stake in the work we were doing together on the curriculum that was a shared community thing. What a shared community thing like a knowledge centre or a curriculum *is*, and how it is going to be done collectively, is the outcome of those controversies and disagreements. The controversies and disagreements help us to see how Balanda and Aboriginal ways of ‘doing’ knowledge and information are different, but also where useful samenesses might lie, and what they might be.

Yingiya told us that some old people ask, “Why do we need a knowledge centre when we have our own rich and strong knowledge centres out in the bush?” Those old knowledge centres keep the stories straight, keep the history in the land, and organised and ‘done’ in the ways it must be. They ask “Why do we want a ‘Community Knowledge Centre’ where Aboriginal ways of doing knowledge and information gets mixed up with Balanda ways of doing knowledge and information?”

He was *not* here arguing for or against a community knowledge centre at Millingimbi or anywhere else, Yingiya told us. It was important that we all recognised this. Such Knowledge Centres might, or might not be a good thing, it depends. But he was interested in a family and place database that would help his family answer the three questions: *Yol nhe* (who you are); *Wanha nhunga wänga* (Where your country is); *Nhaliy nhungu wänga bumar* (What the creative ancestral histories of your place are); *Nhä ringgitji mala* (which other groups, like *merri*, seagull)

Trevor later showed us the “small system” he worked on for a group of art centres in northern Australia. He showed us how ‘the front end’

works—how the data base is ‘done’ by someone who wants to find out about the images, and who might want to buy one. Then he showed us ‘the back end’, how the data base is ‘done’ by someone who works in an art centre and wants to display a new painting that has just come in to the gallery. It’s like the person who wants to buy the painting and the person who is doing the display of the paintings for sale, ‘shake hands’ for a moment. It’s an intimate connection between two people and it is the painting displayed there in the data-base that brought them together.

Trevor’s story helped me to see that data-bases, and I suppose knowledge centres, are about intimate connections between people. It also helped me see that what the data-items *are*, is a big part of the sort of intimate connection people end up having.

So Yingiya and his family and friends like Bryce, might end up doing a family-place data-base. They will be working out as they go along what the data-items *are* and how they are made with digitising video cameras, still image cameras, ‘memory sticks’, and written texts. They will sometimes work the ‘back end’ of the data-base, and sometimes work the front end. And all the family members in the future who work the ‘back end’ and the ‘front end’ will end up having intimate connections through those data-items. And in the community knowledge centres people will connect intimately through the more ambiguous and sometimes contested data-items. The very varied nature of those data-items will ensure rich and complex, and sometimes controversial, connections occur.

Reflections Wednesday 17/3/04—Helen Verran

Collective memory is ‘people in place going on together’. Aboriginal people say it even more strongly: ‘people in place going on together *as a place-people*’. It’s about humans and non-humans, stories and images, actually doing things in place.

Databasing is a particular way of doing collective memory in today’s world. It is one of many ways of doing collective memory. As a way of doing collective memory, databasing might strengthen and enrich those ways of doing collective memory from which people draw their primary

identity. There is also a very strong possibility that as a way of doing collective memory, databasing can interrupt and mess up.

What are some ways of trying to ensure that databasing remains subservient to crucial and established Aboriginal ways of doing collective memory? How can databasing enrich and support the ways Aboriginal communities 'do' their knowledge 'systems'?

One thing we need to give up right at the beginning is the fantasy that it is possible to somehow know the 'structure' or 'architecture' of the 'system.' The most we can hope for is some practical insight into what people actually do in actual times and places.

One of the interesting things about the doing of Aboriginal collective memory at this particular time in Australia's history is that there are two groups who see this as a crucial time. In many Aboriginal communities there are old and middle-aged Aboriginal people, who are searching around for ways to re-invigorate old ways of doing collective memory—that's actually how we, me and Michael and Waymamba, got involved.

Then there are concerned Balanda—anthropologists, and linguists, people in museums and universities who recognise that what their professional groups have collected over the years, is very valuable for Aboriginal communities in doing collective memory. That group of Balanda academics is doing their best to make sure their material is both carefully looked after, and increasingly becomes available to Aboriginal communities. We can be fairly sure that this group will get a lot of funding for that work, and that they will put a lot of effort and creativity in trying to get it right.

For our project there seem to be several things to do. We already seem to know something about how Aboriginal people actually use computers when they are doing information and knowledge in their languages and places, and we are trying to find out more about that. It is empirical on-the-ground information. It cannot be '*invented*' from on the one hand knowing something about how Aboriginal knowledge and information is done in other contexts, and on the other knowing something about how computers do knowledge and information. Of course being familiar with both those can be a help.

Another thing we can do is to ensure that there are ‘front ends’ for databases that particularly suit the ways Aboriginal people use computers when they are doing their knowledges and the modes of information that they are done through. These might be fitted to at least some of the databases that the concerned academics already have already established (and we have Gary finding out about those).

Probably more important is the huge new databases that these concerned academics are in the process of establishing. These huge new databases that academics are now talking about, need not only to have front ends useable by Aboriginal people. They also need to have a structure that is open and flexible. People constructing these new data bases need to make sure they are informed about the empirical results from smaller projects such as ours.

A third thing is to ensure that at least some Aboriginal people are assembling databases for themselves. This implies putting the cameras, the audio recorders, the computers in the hands of Aboriginal people — and then helping them do what they want to do. Noticing what is done and how it is done is crucial to helping the energetic and well-intentioned academics do their databases.

Requirements for an IKRMNA database—Helen Verran

1. Prologue:

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2. Helen's Imagined Requirements for an experimental prototype database to support this third approach

- a. (What type of knowledge is to be stored?) What are the relevant modes of doing information?

Format: data will be generated in digital form: • still images; • video files; • audio files; • text files.

Metadata in a conventional sense will be informal and unstructured.

Audio and video annotation generating new files in response to already existing files will be a common event.

The collection will remain small. It will grow episodically. Once a modus operandi is established it will not change much

- b. Who will use the system?

The system will be used by a small number of Aboriginal people belonging to one-place-people.

Some will do literacy, some will be bilingual with English, but English will not feature as a language by which to 'do' the database.

The users and those doing up-load will be more-or-less the same group.

They will be searching for words.

c What is the key purpose?

This is a database generated for two specific reasons

1. The first is to have a structure so that Aboriginal people can enter digital files, and have a single field for them to record what they think needs to be recorded about that file.

This will construct a specific people-place data base of information that will remain the property of that people-place.

2. The second purpose is a Balanda purpose. I want to be able to describe what actually happens when this pilot system is put in Aboriginal hands (I don't know if this implies anything about how it might be set up.)

d What should the interface look like?

The sole search strategy will search using word matching. But

The first screen should be a flat map of a satellite photo of country with a few hot spots to help in beginning the word search. But this map will not delimit the word search at all. (It is just a pedagogical tool to help get to the word search screen.)

The size of elements in the interface should be large. The researcher will be trying to video, etc Aboriginal people using the system, so what's on the screen during navigating should be clear and capturable.

e Where will be system be used?

Social

It will primarily be used on laptop computers out in homeland centres, or on trips out into country.

This is a pilot experimental prototype Aboriginal managed database.

All the data in the prototype will be solely owned by the participating Aboriginal family. Data will be useable—both search and upload, only by the Aboriginal family. Probably about 20 people teenaged to middle-aged.

The information about how the Aboriginal family actually uses the prototype and the inferences this allows about the nature of databases that might be useful in this situation will not be owned by anyone. This will be made freely available.

How the users devise the protocols and procedures is what this experimental system is designed to find out.

Physical

This will be just one computer. Material will be backed up and archived at CDU, and perhaps in other places.

Unfortunately we don't yet know where we can get a computer, and other hardware and software. We will be trying to get a Macintosh laptop computer over the next few months (any help in this much appreciated.)

f Access

Only the 20 or so users and the researchers will have access.

g Maintenance

Hopefully CDU or Melb Univ will take on maintenance