Editorial

The papers in this issue of the *Learning Communities Journal* grow out of the work of a learning community that began to come to life in CDU's Northern Institute in 2013 organised by the Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance group. We set out to consider 'governance,' a seemingly pervasive contemporary socio-political issue in Australia, by convening a workshop for those interested to write about 'an object of governance' that they were in some way acquainted with.

Why governance? Northern Australia is by no means exempt from the constant buzz around governance which has been a feature of Australian public life for the last decade. In one way or another – as researchers, analysts, educators and facilitators – we are all involved in projects which are related to governance and Northern Australia. At the same time we also seem to be caught up within current shifts around the nature and position of governments in northern Australia. And so we, in our small northern universities, find ourselves forming partnerships with all levels of government, industry, civil society organisations, Aboriginal organisations, and natural resource managers. As a result, we have become deeply implicated in the current government project of devolving responsibilities for service provision to individuals and communities.

There are all sorts of tensions that arise within this work when we, as academic researchers, become involved in these processes. 'Disjuncture' emerge around policy rhetoric and practice, as the 'normalisation' of past practice promoting autonomy and self-determination in Indigenous communities rides alongside contemporary governmental expectations of expansions of economic activity, and as new corporations and forms of corporate law and decision making, enter into everyday life of Indigenous communities. We find ourselves amidst a general confusion around monetisation of socio-political landscapes as currently being experienced by many Australians, including many civil servants. Knowledge and culture practices become radically reformed. In this context, as workshop organisers we considered a focus on objects of governance might help us hold a steady focus while allowing recognition of momentous change.

Not surprisingly the topic of objects of governance caused some confusion. Did we mean an object that was governable? Or, more controversially since it assumes objects have a sort of agency, did we mean the objects themselves seemed to govern in some way? Wasn't it only people who were either the governed or governors?

In part to deal with this confusion, in our call for expressions of interest in attending the workshop, we included a quotation from the work of French philosopher, Michel Serres, (1995) making the odd suggestion that objects have a way of knowing that is all their own, quite different from human knowing.

Look at those children out there playing ball. The clumsy ones are playing with the ball as if it were an object, while the more skillful ones handle it as if the ball were playing with them: they move and change position according to how the ball moves and bounces. ... The ball is creating the relationships between [the children]. It ... creates their team, knows itself and represents itself. Yes the ball is active. It is the ball that is playing with the children (p.47).

We asked would-be workshop participants to: identify an object involved in governance in some situation they were familiar with; and to commit to writing a narrative about it as an object that is active in way Serres has us imagining ‘the knowing’ of a ball that is part of a children’s game; as active.

Why establish a learning community around governance in Northern Australia in 2013?

‘Governance’ has become a buzz word, especially in scholarly engagements with Aboriginal Australia, and in the ‘grey literature’ produced by government. One gets the sense that the increased concern with governance in contemporary Aboriginal life far outstrips the worry over governance in Australian society more generally.

In our approach to considering objects of governance in our learning community we distinguish between government and governance in a way that is sensible in the context of thinking about policy, people and place in northern Australia at the beginning of the twenty first century. Thus, somewhat arbitrarily we confine our use of the term ‘government’ to consider the processes of governance used by organisations of the state – government departments or organisations commissioned by the state. Governance we use to consider collective control and organisation mechanisms in organisations that broadly make up civil society – non-government organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs), and variously incorporated bodies, both public and private.

So why a focus on ‘objects of governance’ in a writers workshop, and what is an object of governance anyway? We turn to Kathryn Pyne Addelson (2002), an American Pragmatist feminist philosopher to begin to answer that question. She has been considering governance in the context of control over American women’s reproductive experiences since the 1970s. In one of her last articles she points to ‘the fetus’ as an object of governance, as mediator, a participant of one sort or another.

The fetus has played important roles on U.S. politics for nearly 50 years. It has participated in political skirmishes over procreation and in the deep moral disputes over how we Americans should live. With the increasing authority of science, a biomedical definition [ontologically speaking a particular sort of object] has come to dominate... [But] the fetus emerged in the early “public problem” of abortion [as a ‘soul,’ a different sort of object] and it is to this day a participant in the [public] problems ranging from abortion to child abuse to AIDS (p.118).

Addelson uses difference to focus up the idea of ‘the fetus’ as the object of governance; ‘the fetus’ is a mediator or participant where governance – some sort of control in the context of collective practice – is being exercised. In Addelson’s work, we see how human collectives are changed by this object; just as Serres urges us to see children with good ball skills working as a team, as changed by a ball.

Our writers’ workshop set out to make such objects of governance more familiar by writing stories about them. We began by considering contemporary government in Australia in the context of recognising a general expansion of concern over governance. To do this we made use of an idea from the French social theorist Foucault, who quite presciently in the 1970s began considering what he saw as ‘a changed diagram of government’ in France. We suggested that the same sort of change could be seen as happening in Australia in the twenty first century. And to capture that sense of change in government process, we drew on Foucault’s term ‘governmentality.’

We can understand governmentality by analogy to ‘musicality’ or ‘physicality’. Just as a musical performance might be said to exhibit a particular type of musicality related to its genre (jazz, classical, afro-beat) and by which the performance might be commented on, and even critiqued, so too might episodes of government actions be commented on or critiqued by identifying their governmentality. But importantly we were not asking those who wished to write short papers for our collection to write on governmentality.

We wanted to use the idea of governmentality for two purposes. First to suggest that all episodes of governance, governance in civil society organisations, and in government organisations are in some way alike, governance too has an “ality” so to speak. Second we used the term governmentality to point to the changed conditions under which government now proceeds in northern Australia. Under this new governmentality, most government services are delivered by non-government organisations, and the processes of governance of those non-government organisations is important. Learning to recognise how objects are active in these processes of governance is important. In addition to the reading from Foucault (2007), in order to problematize taken-for-granted ideas about objects and their names, we set a short satirical text from Jonathan Swift (2005), and a text focusing on ‘scenario’ as an object of governance.

What emerged from our work is the set of texts which follow. We meet the following objects of governance: a cyber-safety pamphlet, the climograph, heat stress, financial literacy, ghost nets, a land management fire, a house in the Aboriginal town camps in Alice Springs, and quality education. Perhaps they may be read as also expressing a particular musicality or physicality as we have puzzled over these objects emerging in our work. In a concluding paper, we as editors have prepared a response to these short narrative papers further developing the idea of objects of governance.

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Editors

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