

An Undercover Leadership Project: Becoming strong leaders and creating ripples of change

BY CATHERINE SMITH

This chapter describes the Undercover Leadership Project (ULP), which developed a series of metaphors drawn from local Dreaming stories to create ripples of change in the lives of young people and Elders who were grappling with the effects of stereotypes, assumptions and other colonising discourses. The project was grounded in strong stories of Aboriginal spirituality and history.

This work took place in Dubbo, which is located on Wiradjuri land, home to the Tubba-Gah people. Wiradjuri is the largest Nation in New South Wales (by land area) and Wiradjuri people form the second largest Indigenous population in NSW. Dubbo is a remote regional city with over 12 Indigenous Nations/

clan groups represented. I am a proud Wiradjuri and Yuin Nation woman and have been honoured to work with my community on this project.

It has long been the collective experience that our local stories are saturated by ‘stories of addiction, poverty, despair and helplessness’ (Butler, 2017, p.23). These stories have been reinforced by professional programs and documents putatively addressing ‘youth problems’. Young people have been labelled and pathologised, and parents, community members and Elders blamed for having ‘allowed’ the ‘situation’ to evolve to a point at which a systemic response was needed to ‘deal with’ young people. Most concerning to the young people and the community has been the minimal presence of

youth and community voices and perspectives in such responses. Little, if any, responsibility has been taken for the oppressive and marginalising acts of the institutions involved. This suggests wilful ignorance of the long-term history of oppression and dispossession and the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism in the telling of stories of Aboriginal individuals and families.

Privileged social welfare workers (and their associates) in our community have engaged with individuals and families *if* they complied with their Western ways of case managing to ‘fix’ or ‘deal with’ people as though they were the problems. My clients have discovered that when a person resists these Western methods, they are labelled ‘noncompliant’. This label places them at increased systemic risk, for example of child removal. Noncompliant persons are frequently denied continuing access to programs – providing further ‘evidence’ for deficit discourses within funded services and their associated professional and social groups.

The initiative that became the Undercover Leadership Project was designed to support young people who were seeking to undermine this dominant story. Through this project we aimed to challenge these problem-saturated single stories of our people.

In narrative practices we are incredibly interested in broader social and historical contexts that go beyond individual, family and community psychology. We work to tell our stories in ways that give us strength, and that honour ‘storylines of pride, strength and

creativity’ (Wingard, Johnson, & Drahm-Butler, 2015). Externalising conversations (White, 2007) supported me to collaboratively coresearch this dominant story with a group of young people and Elders, making space for connection through collective experience so the problems and people’s resistance to them could be more richly known. Sharing stories across collective timelines and identifying the skills and values that sustained our hope and provided healing and strength was achieved through weaving together new and old stories and incorporating wider social and historical contexts. This process took as its starting point that ‘problems are separate from people’ and that ‘people have many skills, beliefs, knowledges, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them reduce the influence of the problem in their lives’ (Wingard quote in Johnson, 2015, p.16).

I was on the hunt to uncover local skills, beliefs, knowledges and values, and eager to create networks to distribute these, reconnecting groups that had become distanced by the discourse. This story begins with Ayden.

Ayden’s story

I first met with Ayden in individual therapy. He shared stories of his struggle to find work while also grappling with the voices of Suicide and Depression. He had been admitted to an inpatient unit and had not found this to be beneficial because the practitioners relied heavily on medication as a solution and he was not comfortable

with this approach. Ayden and I discussed the societal expectations that had been placed on him and the dominant picture of ‘success’ that he felt he needed to live up to. He believed that he was failing to achieve minimum expectations and Suicide was seducing him into thinking that he would amount to nothing. During this discussion, I introduced the concept of ‘decolonising our minds’ (Drahm-Butler, 2015). The idea of decolonisation resonated strongly. In our following sessions, Ayden determined that decolonising his thinking was his top priority. He identified that it was ‘colonising thoughts and expectations’ that were causing imbalance and confusion about what he wanted for his life.

Catherine: Where do you think Suicide got these ideas of what success is?

Ayden: The message is carried through media and schools. It’s just how things have to be. It’s the rules. You can’t be a success if (1) you haven’t finished your high-school certificate; (2) you can’t be an adult who makes money; (3) you don’t have extra certificates and experience.

Catherine: If these are just the rules of success, things you have to do, and Suicide judges you by these rules, someone must have written them, created them? How long have these rules been around?

Ayden and I traced the history of these rules that Suicide had been relying on to hold him down. We found that these rules had not only influenced Ayden’s life, but also the lives and stories of his parents and grandparents. To our knowledge, these rules hadn’t been around before Captain Cook. He brought new rules and the gubba (white) way of living, which included going to work, building a house, having money and paying taxes.

Together, we sought to deepen our understanding of Suicide and the discourses that supported it. Allowing space for the consideration of the political and social contradictions involved provided Ayden with strength and hope. He picked up this line of critique and has held it tightly since. Our yarns deconstructing colonisation led us to contemplate ways to ‘free ourselves from certain ways of understanding ourselves’ – those that seek ‘to tell us how we do not have to be, and to tell us how we came to think of ourselves’ (Sawicki, 1991, p. 37).

These exchanges provided space to raise our conscientization (Lloyd, 1972). They also affected me greatly on a personal level. Ayden began asking me questions about why I felt I needed to prove myself, as an Aboriginal woman, ‘equal or better’ (Ayden used air quotes to amplify his key points). He asked me, ‘why do you play by the “gubba rules” if you don’t align with them?’ and ‘how could you *actually* “make a change” and fight the “rules”?’ This question forced me into a deep dive of reflection.

As we delved into these questions together, Ayden began to make connections between his experiences and stories he'd heard from his peers. He realised that he was not the only one living with this problem. Ayden was a member of Gamarra, an Aboriginal studies and culture group that emerged from a high-school Aboriginal studies class at an alternative pathways school where I worked. When the class ended, 12 students remained connected to yarn to share ideas and culture. Fittingly, *gamarra* is a Wiradjuri word meaning 'awaken'. Ayden began sharing decolonising ideas with the Gamarra group. He introduced that idea that Captain Cook had introduced 'new rules' and that all the new people who arrived lived by these rules and eventually they became the norm. But they were not 'normal' or fair and they placed Aboriginal people at a disadvantage. This struck a chord with others in the Gamarra group who were also trying to navigate these rules after finishing school.

Through weekly discussions with me and with his peers in Gamarra, Ayden identified a desire to become a mentor for others. He was connecting his experiences with the oppression of others and identifying the impacts and influence of colonisation. This developing understanding had resulted in a 'wave of happiness' entering Ayden's life. He didn't want to ride this wave alone: Ayden wanted to share this knowledge with other young people. He wanted his newfound 'wave of happiness' to wash over others and provide 'hope outside of school to fight oppression and depression'. He said, 'these problems are fed and kept strong by the

school system. I don't want to be a politician or anything, I've done too much bad stuff, but we need leaders who understand our struggle'. I connected Ayden back to stories he had told me about his inspiration Bruce Lee, who had hidden away from the public eye to find his truth and perfect his art, which he then shared with the world in his own way – demonstrating leadership without seeking political office. I suggested that Bruce may have some insider knowledge about how to share this important message with others. This is when Ayden asked for assistance to connect with other 'like-minded people' who might want to discuss and add to his developing knowledge. I agreed to support this mission and invited community members to meet to discuss the potential for collaboration on an important project.

Finding a shared language

Before facilitating conversations between groups, a thorough understanding of local Aboriginal language is needed, and expectations and boundaries regarding language use must be negotiated. When I invited community members to come together to discuss Ayden's project, the most notable example of this concerned the use of the word 'mob'. Mob had been adopted by many of the younger people as a positive collective term, but it caused significant offence to our Elders, who associated the word with being rounded up into 'mobs' and taken from family and Country or killed. We needed to negotiate a shared understanding of 'mob' as a term with multiple layers of story and

meaning. The group decided that mob would be used to signify connection and strength, while holding close stories of older participants who had experienced this term being used with contempt. This act of collective reclaiming allowed the group to deepen their shared understanding, and to honour both Elders and young people.

This chapter is written in my best attempt at Standard English, but most yarns out bush and over cuppas were had using Aboriginal English. As Mead and Mack (2015, p. 40) explained, in Aboriginal English ‘there are many words that have a different meaning to that of Standard English, sometimes subtle, sometimes tipped on their head!’ Because I knew the local form of Aboriginal English, I did not need to interrupt to request definitions, but this is a skill I would need to learn if I were working outside Wiradjuri Nation.

Connecting with community

The inaugural meeting of ‘like-minded people’ included Ayden, other Gamarra participants, young people from a local high school and community Elders I had worked with previously.

We connected around a campfire out bush. Each person was invited to introduce themselves by:

- given name and family name
- mob/clan group
- totem, if that knowledge hadn’t been stolen

- Country/Aboriginal Nation and any known family connections.

These traditional locating introductions are important protocol and points of connection. Chilisa (2014) stated that commencing any research or interaction with a statement that situates ourselves is best practice. Butler (2017) extended this in his article ‘Who’s your mob?’, stating that ‘our belonging, our totems, connections to family and to Country – begins the “decolonisation of the mind”’ (2017, p. 23).

I invited the people present to share their experiences and personal definitions of ‘strong leadership’ – something service agencies had claimed was ‘absent’ in the community. People’s definitions of leadership were diverse:

- being in the public eye and influential (politician, celebrity)
- being known and respected
- being brave and having a thick skin
- being strong in your beliefs and knowing where you come from
- doing what you know is right and needs to be done: ‘showing up’
- leading the way for others
- standing up and speaking up for others.

Throughout this first discussion, many corresponding ‘leadership risks’ were also identified: things participants

felt blocked their leadership pathways. Descriptions of lateral violence were shared, as were stories of leadership aspirations being used to punish and control, especially in the school environment. Another risk was that stories from people's pasts could be used against them as proof of a dominant story.

Risks are present when we want to step into leadership roles within community. Risk is increased further when, in Ayden's words, 'there are skeletons in your closet'. Deciding to connect the young people with community Elders had a secondary benefit. Having the Elders sit with us in that space gave an increased sense of security and safety for the young people to share their experiences and truths. Nods and smiles from the Elders provided unspoken affirmation to the young people who were showing the courage to share. The Elders also brought stories and knowledge of significant Aboriginal figures and activists throughout history who had persevered despite their 'skeletons', knowing that the results of their actions would be worth the risk of exposure to judgement and criticism. The sharing of these stories was profoundly significant. In the sand, we created a collective timeline of Elders, leaders and activists, past and present, reaching from before 1788 to the present.

I introduced a yarn to begin breaking down the problem's influence in our lives. I asked:

- What is holding us back from leadership?
- What stands in the way of our dreams to be leaders?

- How does the problem make us feel? How does this thing make us behave?

This externalising yarn created space for us to carefully and collaboratively examine the history of the problem and its ways of working, and to identify any possible 'team mates' that were silently assisting it. I felt it was important to track the effects of the problem prior to naming it. Words in English may not have fully encapsulated the shared experience of the problem, but not all participants had the same connection with or knowledge of Aboriginal languages. Our exploration of the effects and influences of the problem created extra space for the group to come to a resonant name, whether in English, an Aboriginal language or a blend of these. This approach was a deviation from the externalising process I had followed to date (White, 2007). The conversation went well. The influences of the problem were explored, as were people's responses to them. We found that the problem brought:

- anger and aggression
- abusive behaviour
- short temper and explosiveness
- shame about our feelings and actions
- feelings of unfairness
- self-judgement when we believed what the problem said
- 'it makes people think I'm stupid when they don't even know me'
- 'it makes me the villain.'

We now knew what the problem was doing but it still remained unnamed – it seemed to have skills of camouflage.

Our Elder Uncle John was able to plot the actions of the problem across his timeline and provided evidence through story that the problems currently being faced by the community had been acting in this way for a long time. Collectively, the group could remember similar problems operating in most Aboriginal communities where they had resided. The timeline reached back through our collective and family histories. Starting when British invaders assumed Aboriginal people were ‘savages’ and ‘less evolved’, this sentiment was mapped across multiple sites including the Australian Constitution, Aboriginal ‘protection’ acts and the introduction of martial law during the Bathurst Potato Wars led by Wiradjuri warrior Windradyne (Grassby & Hill, 1988), to name just a few. At each point on the timeline, it was clear to the group that these problems had been present. Also present but hidden within these stories were acts of resistance and ‘survivance’ (Wingard et al., 2015). As White (2002) explained, ‘if people are standing for something, then there’s a history to it’. The group committed to continuing to challenge these longstanding problems, taking inspiration from the leaders who had travelled these songlines before us.

I now asked the group if anyone could suggest a possible name or names for the thing creating all the effects they had mapped and described. But before I got a chance to open up the discussion, Uncle John took the floor.

Uncle John, a 90-year-old Elder from our community, was himself a strong leader. However, in his younger life, Uncle John had been labelled an ‘alcoholic’ and a ‘drug user’ and this had locked him out of leadership roles. It was easy for people to consume this dominant story, labelling him problematic. He shared a yarn with the young people about how he had made the decision to defy the expectations and stereotypes that had locked him out of leadership. He had taken secret action to make change in his life. He took small calculated steps until he achieved his personal goals and felt secure enough to step into a leadership role – a role he now holds with great pride in our community.

Uncle John’s story resonated with many of the young people. They felt that ‘expectations’ and ‘stereotypes’ were accurate terms for the problems causing them to be locked out of leadership. This connection and shared understanding across the generations was really significant. Aunty Barb’s words echoed during my reflections on this sharing:

We always find ways to make links and to make connections. What is it that links us? Sometimes shared sorrow, shared injustice is the connection, other times is our wish to share skills, passion and knowledge. There are many different ways that we link storylines. (Wingard, 2013)

Yarns continued throughout the evening about experiences of Expectations and Stereotypes. These names morphed slightly as we talked. The group came

to realise that expectations are not always problematic: 'Your mum or nan can have expectations of you, but what they expect is good'. So it was decided that Expectations should be renamed Assumptions. This was a beautiful development that worked to situate the problem of Assumptions beyond individuals in our community. We decided to learn to manage Assumptions and to minimise the influence it held across many lives and stories.

The bunyip

As I prepared to delve deeper into this enquiry with questions about possible strategies to tame Assumptions and Stereotypes, we were again taken on a tangent. If nothing else, Uncle John loves sharing a yarn. This one was a story of the bunyip. The bunyip is an ancient creature who lives in the water. The bunyip has power and strength, and because of this he can be quite dangerous. He hides underwater in specific places at certain times. The bunyip will watch from the depths until a vulnerable person or animal approaches or enters the water. This is when he launches his silent attack.

Storytelling and Dreaming stories are located in Aboriginal oral traditions; stories are how we have always taught, learnt and connected. Some elements of this Dreaming story are omitted in the account below as certain knowledge is not approved for sharing outside of community. This is the story Uncle John told:

A long time ago, a strong, brave young warrior attempted to kill the bunyip. But because he had been told he was the clan's greatest warrior, he went to the billabong to face the bunyip alone. The warrior wasn't able to defeat the bunyip unsupported. When he stepped into the river he was dragged under the water, never to be seen again. The clan was so scared after this attack on their strongest warrior that they stopped using the river. This caused people to get sick and made life much harder because they relied on fish and vegetables that grew in the river they now feared.

A young man with no skills of battle or warrior knowhow decided he would try to help out the community and fix the bunyip situation. The young man spent many hours sitting in a tree watching how the bunyip lived, tracking his routine and monitoring his hunting ways. After many moons, the boy met with the Elders and shared his observations. He was nervous as it was not his place to tell the old people how to lead, but he persevered because he knew the wisdom he had collected was important for the safety and prosperity of the tribe. The young man drew a map in the sand for the old people. It showed what times the bunyip was active, where his favourite hunting spots were and signals in nature that warned that the bunyip was about. These signals included when the birds couldn't be seen or heard and when the water was still and

quiet. The young man suggested that by knowing and understanding the bunyip, the clan could hunt and collect resources at times when danger was lowest – when the bunyip and his family were resting.

Taking time to understand the bunyip meant that the tribe didn't need to miss out on nourishment or ban access to the water (which is sacred, especially when connected to ceremony). Understanding the bunyip improved safety for people, and as time passed, people became less fearful of the bunyip and the river. The clan returned to life as normal, holding their new knowledge of the bunyip close – never underestimating his potential for harm but not letting this risk stop them continuing cultural and family practices.

As always, Uncle John knew just what to share at just the right moment. I was so grateful as I watched him mesmerise the group with his storytelling. His yarn blended seamlessly into our discussion and provided alternative ways of approaching our problem. The questions with which I had planned to deconstruct Assumptions were replaced with a group response to Uncle John's story. This was a challenge to my predetermined idea of how the session would run. However, interrupting Uncle John would have been disrespectful. I needed to remind myself that this project was not about me, and although I felt I had insider knowledge, my task was to collate the knowledge

of participants. I was invited into the space because I understood cultural protocols and respected my role within culture and community. This meant I needed to sit back and follow the stories, while also attending to words and experiences that I could 'rescue' and connect together at a later point.

After our first session, I arranged to meet with Elders to reflect on their experience of the campfire yarn. The stories and voices of the Elders were to be privileged throughout this project, and the Elders appreciated being heard. The younger participants had been sharing ideas, videos and memes they felt connected or clarified their thinking. I received many text messages, direct messages and snapchats as individuals and teams made connections between their lived experience and the Dreaming story of the bunyip. The connections being shared and expressed were abstract, but none the less resonated. I shared some of these communications with the Elders group, who enjoyed seeing their knowledge presented in new ways and received this feedback with pride and many laughs.

During subsequent campfire circles, discussions focused equally on the problems, Assumptions and Stereotypes, and on the Dreaming story. It was the youngest in the group who shared their insight that the clan from the Dreaming story held assumptions and stereotypes about the bunyip, but that by observing the environment, the young man could 'figure out the bunyip' and improve the situation for his tribe. He did not need to be a warrior. He was secretive and used the skills he possessed. As

one participant finished sharing their understanding and interpretations, the next member would elaborate, suggest alternative perspectives and connect to wider lived experiences and stories from within their family. These yarns developed organically and unearthed rich resources and skills of ‘survivance’ (Chilisa, 2011). I asked questions when space was available:

- What could knowing and connecting with these skills change in our situation?
- What should we be on the lookout for to better understand Stereotypes and Assumptions?
- Which stories resonated most loudly with us?
- How might these stories give us strength as we collaborate to undermine Stereotypes and Assumptions when they affect our community?

It was a robust discussion. As the group began listing the skills they held as individuals and collectives, pride entered the space and sat with us. Listing our unique talents and experiences provided solidarity and strength. We saw that these problems could be ‘called out’ and challenged, but that there was no point fighting a beast that could easily overpower and devour us. There had to be a better way to demonstrate leadership while maintaining personal and community safety. Like the boy who found solutions to the bunyip problem, we thought that one person could create BIG change.

We decided not to avoid the water because of the danger posed by the bunyip. Instead, we wanted to

understand the threat so that we didn’t isolate ourselves from our environment. We positioned ourselves to take strategic action to minimise risk and reduce the chance of being caught by Stereotypes, Assumptions and their allies. This brought us to the official naming of our group: the Undercover Leadership Project. Our action would be collective but secretive; people would know about it when results started to become visible. Discussions evolved as additional skills from Dreaming stories and our old people emerged. We explored possibilities for actions in opposition to what was expected by Assumptions, Stereotypes and their allies. Weaving stories together through double listening and retellings, we identified hidden skills embedded in the lived experiences and stories of our Elders who had ‘led from the shadows’ and taken action that challenged the assumptions and perceptions of others and created significant social change on their own terms.

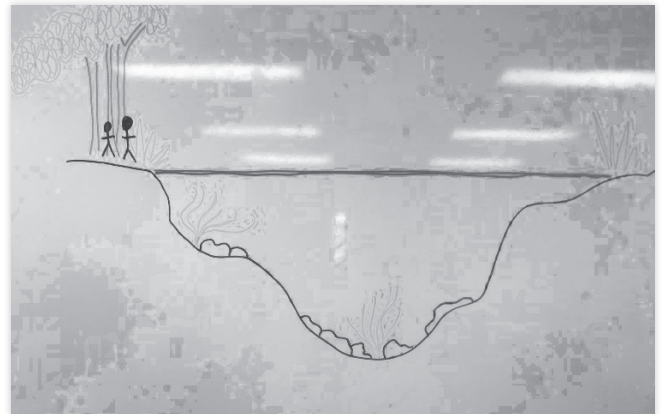
Developing metaphors

The bunyip features in a number of Wiradjuri Dreaming stories. Most young people in Dubbo know snippets of the story of Bunyip Corner on the Macquarie River on the outskirts of town – local kids know not to swim at Bunyip Corner because of the risk of attack. People and buniyps have managed to establish a balance and a sacred agreement throughout local history by understanding each other, respecting boundaries and making choices to stay safe in relation to water. Our undercover leadership plan, inspired by Uncle John’s bunyip story, began in our

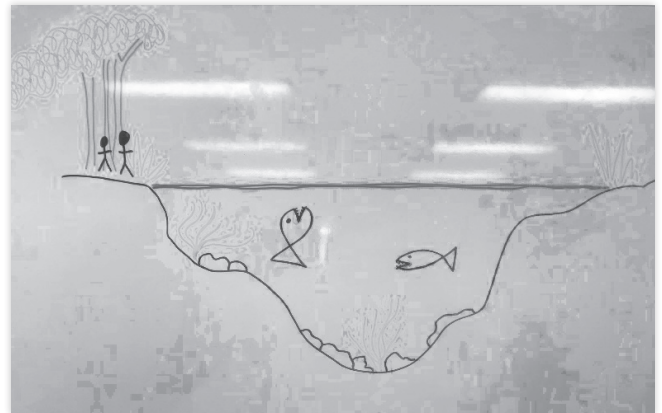
‘pond’– our environment, the places we had no choice but to access for our survival. This pond encompassed the Dubbo community, schools and police.

Our investigation of our pond environment showed that it could change at any time. In school, for example, teachers and executive staff shaped the landscape. Students shared experiences of things that happened if someone in authority was ‘having a bad day’ or decided they had ‘had enough’ of dealing with ‘problem’ students. They would agitate students and escalate the situation, resulting in students being suspended and excluded. Students definitely don’t win in this situation, and they reported that exclusion invited Anger and Resentment. Knowing the stories of our ancestors and Elders, the young people decided that Anger and Resentment were not good allies and would not be invited to participate in future responses. All parties were overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems and barriers hiding under the surface of the pond. These impacted all areas of our lives.

The pond metaphor was used to explore the dangers present in the environment in which we planned to initiate change and challenge the dominant story. A complex visual metaphor was developed through externalising conversations. Within the pond we added knowledge of:



- **weeds** – these represented constrictive systems and institutions; weeds may not look like a significant danger but they can entangle people and drown them



- **fish** – the fish present in our metaphorical pond were introduced species representing colonisation and the colonisation of our thoughts and actions; these fish were equipped with sharp teeth and posed a significant threat to anyone who entered the water

- **fish parasites** – it was identified that members of the Undercover Leadership Project shared an assumption that *all* colonising fish collaborate with Assumptions and Stereotypes; further deconstruction questioned this belief and it was decided that the dangerous or offending fish were those that had a parasitic infection – how might it be possible to remove this parasite?

Through discussion and suggestions from the Elders questions emerged: How can we change the state of the water without entering the pond? How can we do so without meeting the Stereotypes and Assumptions that are projected on to us? I hoped the evolving pond metaphor would enable us to grapple with the multiple relations of power embedded in these questions.

We determined that the group needed to create change in this pond, but that for a number of reasons it wasn't safe to dive in. First thoughts included poisoning the water. This would kill the fish, fixing the immediate problem but also destroying a living resource. We had to find a way to address the invasion problem. Once we started to analyse the behaviours of the fish and weeds and to further assess the pond, the group decided that not all the fish were dangerous to us. Some had limited awareness of their impact and didn't fully understand how they came to invade the river system and our pond. Each danger in the pond had a weakness that could be targeted. For example, the weeds were rooted and unable to move easily; the parasites needed the fish but were the fish aware of what they were carrying with them?

A definitive decision not to use poison was made after uncovering vulnerabilities and target areas within the pond. We determined that the central problems of Stereotypes and Assumptions were weakened when:

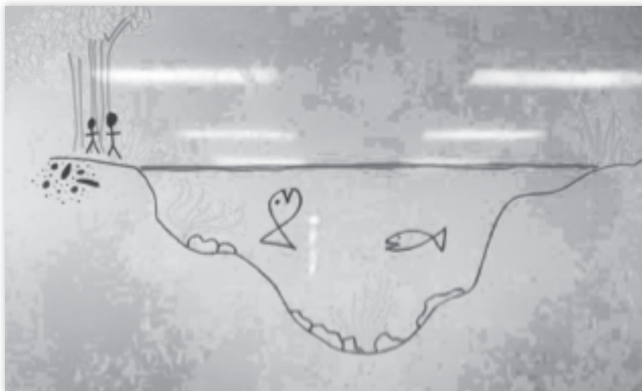
- we spoke openly about our experiences and our feelings – talking 'broke the tension' (we could use text, direct message or snapchat for this if we were alone)
- we asked for help and advice from our Elders, families and peers
- we talked openly and proudly about the resilience of mob – our history of intelligence and innovation: 'Tell them to watch *First Australians* (Perkins, 2008) and read *Dark Emu* (Pascoe, 2014)'
- we documented our experiences by writing in a journal, and then brought it in to share with the group after having time to process our own feelings and feel ready to share.

Continuing with our water metaphor, the group agreed that the best way for us to change the state of the pond was to create ripples. Ripples were selected because:

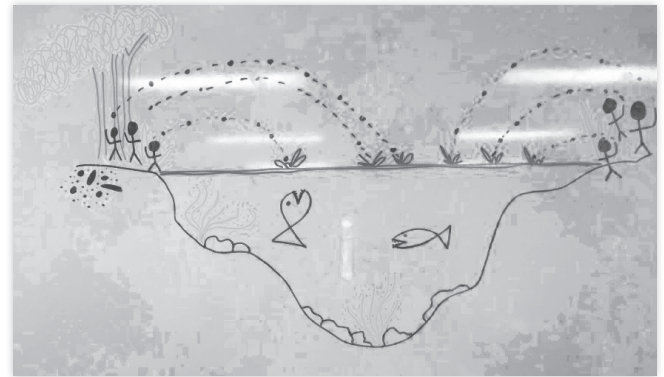
- they are silent and subtle
- they can alter the surface of the water
- enough collective and consistent movement of water we can generate electricity

- ripples can move easily around obstacles; a lily pad on top of the water might limit how far a ripple travels, but the ripple will make it past the obstacle
- they are able to travel vast distances across water and create change on the other side of the pond, without us needing to move from where we are standing or to enter the water.

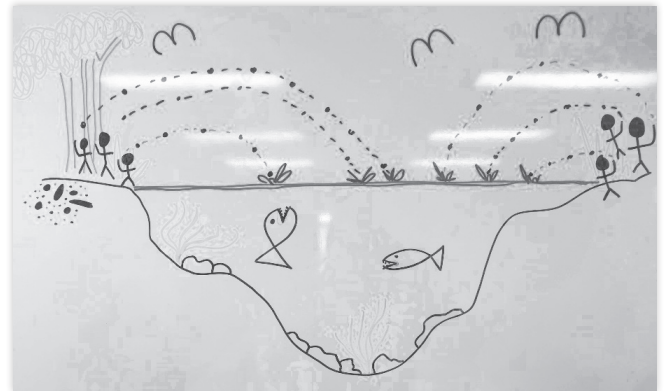
This discussion brought forth a number of other metaphors, filling our pond with images:



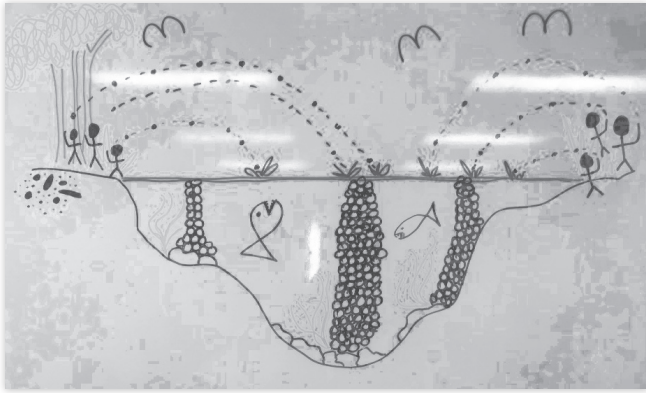
- **rocks** – these represented our skills, knowledge, stories and kinship, which had been collected throughout our lifetimes and before, handed down through generations to ensure our rock pile was large enough to achieve our objectives



- **throwing stones** – this represented the ULP's individual and collective action and initiative



- **birds** – the birds, watching as they circled above, came to represent our Elders and our ancestors who were watching our collective work and seeing influence of their stories



- **the bridge** – just when I thought the ripple metaphor had reached its peak, the ‘bridge’ emerged as a way to cross the pond and access more of the water safely; collective action and team planning would ensure this ‘bridge’ provided increased safety.

The group continued to add to its resource rock pile throughout the project in response to questions like:

- What skills were hidden in what you just heard?
- How were these skills used?
- What resulted from using these skills?

The group encouraged and supported everyone to take action, remembering that ‘it’s not just the size of the rock, but how you throw it and where you aim’. All acts of resistance were valued and celebrated. As the bridge metaphor developed, we conjectured that by targeting our rocks at a specific area, over time underwater pillars might begin to develop.

While we were working with the rocks of our skills, knowledges and histories, we thought about the birds supporting us from the sky, telling us what they could see. The birds also came to represent our ‘silent supporters’ who may have been unable to throw stones for reasons of their own safety. The birds could not throw stones either, but they could definitely help us to target them where they were needed. Furthermore, experienced allies like Kingfisher could dive bomb the water with incredible accuracy, targeting the parasite rather than the whole fish.

Widening circles

Gamarra: finding resonance

The Gamarra culture group were invited to act as outsider witnesses to developments in the Undercover Leadership Project. Although they had been engaged in the initial session, study and family commitments meant that weekly attendance was not possible for many Gamarra members. However, their contributions were valued, so inviting them as outsider witnesses enabled us to include them in a different way. The pond metaphor and the objectives of the Undercover Leadership Project were described to the Gamarra members who were invited to respond. The outsider witnesses found strength through the externalisation of problems that were familiar to them too. The impacts of colonisation were incorporated within the double-storied retellings. The responses of the Gamarra outsider witnesses

showed that the older Undercover Leadership Project members and the high-school students could develop and share a common discourse.

Dwight: Connecting our actions to others

Dwight was a 14-year-old boy. His dominant, problem-saturated story was well known throughout the Dubbo area and this had created significant barriers to his access to education and community as people were always waiting for him to create chaos. Dwight had collected 'knowledge stones' to create personal ripples and rewrite his story. Additionally, Dwight wanted to use his story to protect the interests of his vulnerable peers. One of his friends, Bet, lived with physical and cognitive disability, and as a result found himself excluded from many activities. Dwight chose to create a ripple to challenge this injustice, using his past story of 'aggression and violence' to protect his friend at school and on the playground using only his words (part of his challenge to Assumptions and Stereotypes was to never act in expected ways). When I asked Dwight about this act of resistance, he told me, 'if they think that's who I am, I can use it until they realise my pond has changed'. When Dwight discovered that Bet was not able to attend football training because he was unable to shower and dress himself (no staff member believed that it was their responsibility to assist), the 'toughest and baddest' kid in school decided he could help. Dwight offered to shower and dress his friend as a way to knock down what Stereotypes and Assumptions had to say about Bet's

abilities. This action created significant shifts within the ULP. The Gamarra outsider witnesses valued Dwight's selflessness and inclusivity and connected these to stories of local Elders past and present. Many expressed a wish that someone like Dwight had been in their class to help them. These ripples and responses were the start of a new chapter for Dwight. The outsider-witness responses to Dwight's 'action rocks' highlighted the impact and distance travelled by the ripple he created. This encouraged others to continue to throw their own rocks.

Dwight's efforts to challenge the stories that were told about him inspired others in the ULP to reach out and challenge dominant stories, this time in response to social media posts about a bike stolen from one of our ULP Elders. The call was put out (through various social media platforms) for the bike to be returned. This was followed by threads of comments threatening violence and punishment of the offender, calling them worthless. Threats to involve the police came thick and fast, despite the group and Elder not wanting to see this happen. The group was able to connect to the young man who had taken the bike, and to support him to return the stolen goods and apologise in person to Uncle. They wanted to connect the young man and to offer an opportunity for him to be known by more than the dominant story. Their experiences of yarning through differences and problems led to the group having a men's business yarn about choices and their impact on being a strong man. Because of this action, there was no judicial response

or incarceration. These ripples demonstrated to the ULP that our actions could be undercover while still being highly effective and impacting many people in significant ways.

Tom: small stones

Tom was a new student at school. Members of the ULP had identified him a peer who could benefit from their ripples, but he had refused or ignored all attempts by the ULP members to connect with him. The group had noticed his isolation and wanted him to feel included. Following this lead from the ULP, I approached Tom and his support staff to see if he would like an opportunity to yarn. The difficulty of connection was explained to me: he had chosen to be nonverbal at his new school. They thought it was unlikely that he would want to yarn. His support staff and teachers had no knowledge of Tom's history and were unable to suggest any reason for his silence and self-isolation. Despite all expectations to the contrary, Tom did agree to meet with me, and these meetings continued over two school terms. We discussed his experience and observations of his new school and briefly touched on his life before relocating to Dubbo. I accepted frequent silences and resisted filling them. I didn't want to force conversation or for Tom to feel he was being interrogated. Tom explained that he had lots of friends 'back home' (a small rural town 500km west of Dubbo) and that he hadn't made any friends at his new school. I asked if there was anyone who had been supportive of his attempts to make friends and 'fit in'. He told me that his peer support workers were 'trying' but

that 'it isn't their fault because I don't really like men'. I was curious to hear more about Tom's choice to remain distanced from men while actively seeking friendships with male peers. It was at this point that I received an unexpected 'testimony of trauma' (Oliveira, 2015) from Tom. He disclosed that his relocation was sparked by an 'extreme crazy', in which he had witnessed what can only be described as unbelievable family violence. The result of this violence saw Tom lose his mother from the physical world. Tom and his brothers were subsequently moved into the care of an aunty.

Embedded in the story Tom shared were multiple stories of resistance and survival in the face of the 'extreme crazy' and 'crushing violence'. Guided by Yuen's (2007) questioning, and wanting to avoid negative identity conclusions of victimhood, I asked Tom a series of questions hoping to better understand the special knowledges and skills of living that he had demonstrated. I asked:

- How did you know crushing violence was coming before it arrived?
- What did knowing this allow you to do?
- Did knowing this about the extreme crazy and crushing violence mean that you could take steps to keep people safe in the house?

I supported Tom to identify the people who had witnessed or benefited from his acts of resistance, and those who had made a difference to his life during this time:

- Did your steps to protect others make a difference to them?
- By taking this action to protect them, what were you telling these people?

Tom identified that his mother, brothers and friends had provided him with strength and motivation to survive and had benefited from his actions. This was why he knew he needed friendships again. I had told Tom about some of the ULP undercover work and suggested this could be a group where he would find solidarity, and that they could also benefit from his skills in resistance and his knowledge of ‘extreme’ situations. Tom decided on some actions he would take during the following weeks: he would challenge himself to create his own ripples by smiling at three people a day as a way to nonverbally show he was open to new friendship opportunities and connections. I also alerted the ULP to be on the lookout for signs Tom was seeking inclusion in their secret mission. Tom was willing to stand at the water’s edge, which was a significant first public action for him. Tom later reported that it was easier to pick up a rock and throw it knowing the selected ‘knowledge stone’ had seen success when used previously. Also strengthening his commitment was the known presence of others at the water’s edge supporting him: ‘there is safety in numbers’. Tom had previously felt that he stood alone against the problems he faced and was excited at the prospect of finding acceptance and solidarity within a group. It was an exciting day when Tom was ready to reach out and accept support from peers through the ULP.

Once Tom spoke to his peers about his plans, the ULP group kept close to ensure no opportunity to include or support Tom was overlooked. Tom also introduced a safety net, asking that even if he were to withdraw, he would still like people to stay connected to him and encourage him to join in.

Six months later, after consistent action from Tom at the water’s edge, he was participating in school activities and attending social events with his newfound friendship group. He was always on the lookout for other young people in similar situations who he could support by paying forward his knowledge and ensuring they were included.

Tracking collective ripples across and through our stories

Stories continued to ripple through our pond. The ULP exceeded their commitments to meet and share success stories regularly. Some of the most important times were when the Elders would respond to the young people’s tellings and retellings. They identified actions and skills they heard woven through the young people’s stories and connected these with knowledges they had shared in stories. Like the birds, they were effective supporters and their skills and advice were validated, valued and respected. ULP members described our pond:

Our pond now: so many ripples it is like the middle of a rain shower... ripples scattered everywhere you look. Piles of stones that stand

taller than us, so much knowing within our reach. Birds, birds, birds fly overhead singing to us. We know we are doing good. More Kingfisher diving for us and removing parasites and the fish are nicer to us when there are fewer Assumptions and Stereotypes parasites.

The ULP generated a list that was witnessed and added to by the Gamarra group and was the inspiration for a ULP 'leadership manifesto'. The list of 'tips' for maintaining wellbeing while being strong in leadership consolidated our learnings and experiences from throughout the year. It demonstrated the efficacy of narrative practices. So much more had happened within the project than I had planned for.

The Undercover Leadership Project's advice to others wanting to create ripples of change

- Turn down the volume of voices (or cancel membership for people) that are harmful or stand in the way of your goal.
- Turn up the voices that cheer you on and help you target your throws and believe you can hit the mark.
- Find your like-minded people – you are at increased risk when you try to do this work out in the open or by yourself.
- Do not let people's stories of YOU affect how you write your future chapters.

Just because they *think* they know your story (from years ago) doesn't mean they know you now (or know where you are going).

- Retell stories of our Elders' songlines and our Dreaming stories to guide you when you get tangled in the weeds of colonisation.
- Action is action. Find your unique throwing style.
- Stand in your truth and power, gifted to you by Ancestors and their stories. Take strength from their journey and trust in their path.

Undercover Leadership Project's leadership manifesto

We want to show up. We want to learn and we want to inspire emerging leaders like us.

We are hardwired for connection, curiosity and engagement. We want to create an ecosystem that supports a new generation of leaders who share our values and hopes.

We crave purpose, and we have a deep desire to create and contribute.

We want to take calculated risks, based on the lessons from our Elders and ancestors and seeing the risks they took. We want to embrace vulnerabilities and be courageous, even in the face of colonisation and barriers constructed by invasion.

When our efforts in learning and working are dehumanised, when you no longer see us and no longer encourage our daring, or when you only see what we produce or how we perform, we disengage and turn away from the very things that this world needs from us: our talent, our ideas and our passion.

BUT NO MORE.

Disengaging only hurts us. Instead, we decide and promise to stand in solidarity, holding our truth in our hearts.

What we ask is that you engage with us, show up and stand beside us, and be willing to learn our language, our stories and our ways of being – as we are willing to learn from you.

Our Elders taught us that feedback is a function of respect. When you don't have honest conversations with us about our strengths and our opportunities for growth, we question our contributions and your commitment.

Above all else, we ask that you show up, let yourself be seen, be courageous. stand in solidarity with us. Dare to lead greatly with us!

Our project of co-researching Assumptions and Stereotypes both emerged from and was immersed in cultural practice. And like in culture, so much was unspoken, relying on micropractices and nonverbal expressions to signal respect, gratitude and resonance.

Ayden's original quest to share his truth and 'ride the wave of happiness' with others connected him to 'like-minded' people within his community. Ayden's first ripple was strong and travelled a great distance, bouncing back throughout the project and intersecting with the ripples created by others. Experiencing this initial ripple and acknowledging the stone required to create it supported engagement by Elders. The Elders shared stories that enhanced the potential for ripples in the pond. Our Elders provided safety, influencing and inspiring everyone connected to the ULP with their strength, resilience and knowledge. This project would not have been successful without the dedication and trust shown by our Elders. Their stories forever changed our outlook and approach to life. Their ripples will continue to support and strengthen our desire to challenge the effects of colonisation.

Tom's individual ripples inspired others to step up and support him, and to take their own actions towards individual and collective change. The school group was most vulnerable. Protection was built through solidarity groups and supporting each other to 'throw strong'. They collectively achieved their goals. The group took pride in sharing 'untold' stories at school, challenging Stereotypes and Assumptions that had previously plagued their experience of the pond.

Reviewing and reflecting on this project has highlighted the complexity of the problems we decided to tackle. The process of re-authoring our problem stories was powerful in reclaiming our 'strong stories'. One of the most

significant achievements was that all of the individual actions taken by participants were linked to the broader decolonising mission of the project. I drew closely on work of Tileah Drahm-Butler (2015) in introducing decolonising practice, and on Aunty Carolynanha Johnson's (2015) work, which connects individuals and communities through metaphors of trees and forests. Aunty Carolynanha's work relies heavily, as did the ULP leadership project, on outsider witnessing practices to solidify metaphor and experience. We positioned individuals as separate from problems, connected people through listening, and used shared retellings and double storying to thicken preferred ways of being, all the while disrupting the influence of colonisation. Co-designing this project with community allowed each individual ripple to be celebrated as a shared success through definitional ceremony, building pride in the ripples created and celebrating the impact they made. The use of definitional ceremony, which is 'explicitly political' (Denborough, 2019), fostered our collective

belief in our strong story and empowered the group to continue altering the state of the pond independently, demonstrating self-determination. These ripples of change could not have been created without narrative approaches to community therapy. The ULP created a new lens to 're-view' our individual and collective experience, surrendering our 'double consciousness' (DuBois, 1903) and returning to our Dreaming stories and our history of resilience, innovation and survivance. The ULP shared this message through its collective document and leadership manifesto. Individually and collectively, the ULP aspires to continue recruiting others to learn from and add to the rock pile, with an open invitation to join in action when people feel they are ready. I personally find strength knowing I have contributed to a project that will continue to create ripples into the future. I am beyond grateful for, and deeply humbled by, the connections formed and stories retold.

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