

Learning to Listen: the project

‘ ... the level of need for assistance with core activities - self-care, mobility or communication - was almost twice as high for Indigenous persons as that of the general population’

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter5102008>

‘One of the best outcomes from the Parliamentary apology on 13 February was that it got a lot of people talking about reconciliation ... in new ways made possible *because their hearts were touched on the day...*

The opportunity now is to keep Australians engaged and move people along the spectrum from *vague interest to empathy and active involvement.*’

Barbara Livesey, CEO, Reconciliation Australia in Reconciliation News, Issue no. 11, May 2008



‘As a nation, we have a problem with racism. We’re a country that only four years ago argued with the United Nations

against the removal of the word “Nigger” from a sports oval grandstand in Toowoomba, Queensland.’ – **Chris Graham, ‘Five Steps to a better BlackLife in Australia’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 12 July 2009, p.41**

Victim's Anger over Reduced Compensation

**Jessica Strutt -
The West Australian,
16th August 2009**



**I lived at Minninup for years before I found out about the Minninup massacre; when I asked at the Minninup library, there was no information on it...disappeared –
Bunbury resident**

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Who's involved?

Enable Southwest, partnered by:

- **Kimberley Individual and Family Support Association, Broome**
- **Upper Great Southern Family Support Association, Narrogin**
- **STRIVE, Bridgetown**

Our agencies have different demographics, but share congruities of vision, objectives, philosophy and needs.

We are sharing learning experiences, stories and their outcomes, insights, information and reflections on strategies for improving the effectiveness of our service-provision to Aboriginal¹ persons who require support. The year long project is funded under DSC Service Improvement grant funding.

What are we doing?

'All Australians really need to do is get to know each other.'

– Auntie Joan Tranter, UTS Sydney – 'Respect' project

This simple but profound statement illuminates our project's intent. 'Learning to Listen' is based on and promotes active, 'heartful'², responsive listening - to the stories of Aboriginal people with a disability, their families, their carers and their community members/groups.

Our organizations are making connections with a range of Aboriginal people who have an interest in services for people with a disability: and almost every extended family group has a direct interest.

We're meeting up with day centre mobs, health workers, artists, counselors, child protection workers, ACAT presenters, musicians, dancers and educators.

Stories are sometimes taped, or remembered and scribed as and when appropriate. Participants are provided with Information and Permission forms (attached); any constraints the contributors wish to put on their story's use are recorded and form part of our agreement. We have some questions to 'guide' conversations (attached): so far we've only needed to use one... There are many stories to learn to listen to: they include reflections on our own memories and experiences; responses to films, auto/biographical writings, novels, historical documents, media reports, artworks, even overheard conversations,

For Enable, there was much interest in our joint hosting, with S.W.A.M.S. and Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School, the Southwest's premiere of ***Samson and Delilah***, the powerful and beautifully-made film that confronts us with the realities of dealing with disability and love in a remote and under-resourced Aboriginal community. In

¹ The term Aboriginal is used for ease of reading but is to be taken to refer also to Torres Strait Islanders.

² *'...includes researchers' emotions, bodies and spirits; produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail; is concerned with moral, ethical and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy; helps us know how to live and cope; features multiple voices and repositions 'readers' and 'subjects' as coparticipants in dialogue'.* (Heartfelt autoethnography, in *Qualitative Health Research* Vol 9 (5), September '99.)

particular, the 'humility and warmth' of the interchange between our CEO, Rob Holmes and the Elder and grandmother who offered our 'Welcome to Country' before the film, was remarked by several people – some of whom have since approached Enable interested in being involved in Enable's work and the project.

Many stories are shared with us with striking generosity and equanimity: they are from strong mothers who want to access services for their children and young people, and grandparents who want to find engaging programs for grandchildren whose parents may not be able to care for them, or who may not wish to entrust their care to state-funded/directed provisions.

Some stories are proud accounts of parents who managed to keep caring for their children with a disability by moving from place to place, vigilantly avoiding 'the welfare' and police. They are stories of sons, encouraged and supported, who responded to physical disabilities by dancing across the world. We are listening closely to these stories: these are some of the potential service-users our agencies missed. We are learning much, and are honoured.

Why are we doing this?

'Taking time to understand a local Aboriginal perspective to disability is an essential part of developing services or supports in partnership with individual, family or community, that are culturally relevant, acceptable and likely to be effective.' - *DSC, 2007.*

A partner's perspective:

- Enable is evolving as **a learning organization, open to the *interactive process*** that true *education* – the 'bringing out of latent potential' – is based on.
- We are committed to offering all our staff the challenge and enrichment of **inclusive Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Training** by local groups that will be followed up with (i) **support**/updated information, and (ii) **the maintenance of productive relationships** with local groups and families.
- As co-participants in these life-story-tellings, we are gaining **new perspectives on difference**, respecting different ways of being in the world, attending to 'other' films and media, and recognising different kinds of knowledge.
- We know that the practical measures through which our organization has reformed have resulted in a body of workers who are able and care to offer **appropriate and responsive services** to Aboriginal people.

Non-Aboriginal people don't understand the ways of Aboriginal people. They should learn.'(metropolitan participant) – *DSC, 2007*

What's going on now?

The knowledge produced through the spoken story-telling element of this 'learning to listen' project is **embodied, local knowledge**. Effective, inclusive service provision develops from connections/conversations between local Aboriginal individuals/groups and local agency 'learners'. So there won't be a 'model', a paradigm for 'Aboriginal

engagement' as an outcome of this project: each area's profile and requirements are different - and will change. But there will be **demonstrations of engagement, and creative responses to shared understandings**. The dialogue achieved will inform service improvements and inform staff: we offer in return a **commitment to ongoing A.C.A.T. training by local groups** for all our staff and so a continuing awareness of local Aboriginal service requirements.

Each participant in our project may be - simultaneously and/or sequentially - **a storyteller, a listener and a re-producer of stories**. Shared stories involve imagination and expressive language that can be effective and affecting: there may be many voices and images involved in making and responding to an ongoing story. It is a respectful, illuminating and creative process that **recognises lived experience as valid, meaningful knowledge-production**.

Still, however, our broad enculturation remains one based in racism and denial: so we may see and not-see, hear and not-hear the racism inherent in our national institutions and organizations. If we are not *reminded*, for example, of the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families and its ongoing effects, then that knowledge may remain elusive, insubstantial, ineffectual for service improvement and change... There are risks and vulnerabilities involved in engaging in a 'heartful', open way with others whose stories around disability and service-use/provision may differ substantially from our own.

- Project partners are currently **clarifying the nature of our respective roles and chosen inputs** to the project.
- **Stories that already exist** (e.g. the successful relationship-building in Fitzroy Crossing that has been maintained following the initial involvement of a DSC consultant to introduce services and information for Aboriginal groups in the area) **will be shared, and strategies examined** for general application.
- A **critically reflective/reflexive³ practice** will be shared within and between our organizations that deconstructs and examines, for example, the ways that Aboriginal experience and knowledges may inform and enrich our own practice; and how one story may produce a response/responses that form an ongoing 'conversation'...(e.g. Samson and Delilah)
- **More stories** will be 'collected' and responded to through similar processes;
- A **project review** will be produced in January 2010 as an interim report to DSC; and in early 2010 partners will meet for review and to discuss the next phase.

³ Freshwater, D. and Rolfe, D., Critical reflexivity: A politically and ethically engaged research method for nursing. *Nursing Times Research*.2001; 6: 526-537