

INFORMATION SERVICES AT NUNGALINYA COLLEGE, DARWIN

John Pinson

Nungalinya College is a Northern Territory combined churches training and research centre founded by the Anglican and Uniting Churches in 1973 to provide appropriate education for the Yolngu people¹ of Arnhemland. In 1995 the Roman Catholic church joined as an equal partner, and the centre is also supported by the Lutheran Church. The College base is in Darwin, and it is Australia-wide in operation. Wontulp-Bi-Buya in Queensland has a field officer in Rockhampton, and operates in six regional centres. There is a regional centre in Adelaide, and informal centres in Thursday Island, Perth, Melbourne and the Uniting Church Institute for Mission in Sydney.

Its present vision is to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples empowered and self-reliant, freed from dependence and oppression to take their rightful place as respected members of the Australian Community. We see Aboriginal people with their culture intact, a strong faith and equipped to serve their people, their church and their community. A country where non-Aboriginal Australians respect Aboriginal culture, traditions and history, and where all Australians live together in peace and harmony,

This is realised by a program which is "the best of both ways learning" — aiming to combine traditional Aboriginal and Islander learning styles with the best techniques of mainstream education. Teaching is in English, because of the wide variety of Aboriginal languages spoken. However, Aboriginal languages are encouraged, and topics will be explained in the vernacular for small groups by Aboriginal staff.

There are usually 24 students in residence at the Darwin campus, with roughly 200 enrolled attending short courses as residential or day students. A lot of teaching is done in the remote communities, as staff move out with lesson materials to support students, and encourage participation.

The college was set up as a Bible teaching centre, and *Theological and Church Leadership Training* remains an important stream. Many Aboriginal clergy have graduated and been ordained from Nungalinya. *Community organising* aims to provide the life skills people need to manage their communities, and to integrate into the broader Australian society. *Bicultural life studies* is designed to encourage students to take their natural skills, and develop personal self-sufficiency. In the *Cross cultural awareness* programs Balanda (white people) come in for short courses to become familiar with some aspects of Yolngu culture. *Micro-enterprise and Craft* trains students in both traditional and non-traditional craft skills to earn money, obtain self-respect and realise their worth.

Underlying these courses is a literacy and numeracy stream. Many students are from remote communities, for whom English is a second or third language. Literacy and numeracy is designed to enable them to acquire the skills they need to function in a predominantly Balanda society and culture, so adding to their competencies.

The College is an approved private vendor of vocational education and training, and is a recognised Aboriginal organisation under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Act. It has four Certificates and an Associate Diploma accredited at TAFE level.

There are three groups of library users at Nungalinya: community, staff, and students. Nungalinya is the only publicly available theological library in Darwin, so we have a group of users glad to avail themselves of our holdings of biblical, philosophical and theological materials. Some users also come to use our Aboriginal studies holdings, including our

¹There are a number of names used by Aboriginal people. Yolngu is used in the Northern Territory, as Koorie is used in Victoria, or Murri in Queensland. Similarly Balanda [literally Hollander] is used as the Yolngu term for a person of European descent.

audiovisual material. Our collection development policy, particularly aims at acquiring video cassettes of Aboriginal interest.

Staff use is mostly for supporting courses and course development. There is some research use of our holdings and a trickle of interlibrary loans as our holdings go up on ABN. We have an agreement with the University Library for mutual recognition of users; staff avail themselves of the greater holdings just up the road for such things as computer journals and education research.

At the end of 1993, after a thorough review of the library operation, the College Council accepted a recommendation to automate the library by installing a Dynix library system. The Library still operated on a card catalog and it was noticeable that students did not use the drawers. Yolngu learning starts from a quite different set of basic assumptions. The world is a 'given' — the ancestors formed it in the dreaming, and people are here to fulfil that instruction. Most learning is informal - without specifically arranged programs, carried on by relatives, and the content controlled by immediate survival needs. Instruction is carried on by non-verbal means, a process of imitation rather than by a structured curriculum. Learning is a life-long process; skills taking years to acquire and pass on.²

Given this understanding, traditional library catalog and reader education practice is inappropriate for Yolngu services. Leaving aside the slanted nature of much cataloguing content, Yolngu are linguistically ill-equipped to cope with the unwritten cultural assumptions of the card catalog and are very reluctant to interrupt the Balanda (who always looks very busy) to ask questions.

The first library collection was based on the collections of the founding staff. This was blown away by Cyclone Tracey! Occasionally I find some battered items, remnants of that wild night. Holdings recognise the areas the college teaches in - community studies, craft, small business, literacy and numeracy and theology.

Aboriginal materials are held as a separate collection. We especially collect in the area of Aboriginal language materials, and audiovisual items. Students understand the layout of the collection, and immediately go to the relevant areas, to browse. We also try to do a lot of display work on important themes, eg dreaming stories, communities, women's business, and so on.

There was extensive consultation with our users concerning materials which dealt with 'tabu' topics, eg. women's business or secret ceremonies, or contained portraits of deceased people. It was eventually agreed that the material be shelved in clearly marked envelopes advising users of the nature of the material enclosed. Thus users are spared the shame of unexpectedly encountering secret material, but users with legitimate need can readily access the items without having to come to the reference desk and identify themselves. So far as I am aware, this compromise is working satisfactorily.

An Opac encourages experimentation and imitation. A project in view is to design the Opac with alternatives in several of the major languages used by our students. Hopefully, we will also be able to use graphics in due course, so that students may, for example, be able to search on a symbol for their people, rather than the words. The "Kids catalog" development in Dynix encourages hope for this idea. The aim must be to encourage independent exploration of our holdings. In addition, the Dynix Opac gives positive feedback to users, and the 'shame' of seeming to fail is eliminated. Everybody gets some sort of answer from using the Opac, and it is noticeable that students will now go to the Opac and search for themselves!

The Northern Territory University Library has strongly supported the College in automating the library function. Some of our reasons for choosing Dynix can be seen from

²There is a large volume of literature — I am using *Living and learning in an Aboriginal community* compiled by Ruth Lipscombe. Darwin: Professional Services Branch, N.T. Dept of Education, 1981

the above, and credit should be paid to our colleagues at NTU for their ungrudging assistance as we get started. As noted earlier, Dynix gives us the opportunity of making the library holdings available to the communities, and of eventually sending collections out to the communities for use by students there - rather than having everything in Darwin!

As the reader will notice, this is very much a 'work in progress' report. Sometimes it feels as though everything is wanted at once, as we try to get the collection on the Dynix system, while maintaining services and developing appropriate systems for our users. We were recently successful in gaining a grant to employ a cataloguer for our Aboriginal language collection - it will be good to see that unique material on the catalog, and recorded on the National database. We plan to enrich the records with details of translators where they can be identified, and as much other related material as possible.

Services to Yolngu users need to start from an understanding of their unique user needs and expectations - as should all adequate library services. In the future, the library will have to do much of the work of the dreaming stories, and the memory of the elders. If we manage to transmit the heritage as faithfully, and for as long as Yolngu culture has - we will do well!

John Pinson is Librarian at Nungalingya College.

