Chapter 12
Crossing into the Dreamtime:
Evaluating the Benefits of Weblogs as a Blended Learning Tool for University Students to Teach Elementary School Students about Australian Culture

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ABSTRACT
It is the intent of this chapter to offer an explanation of a program between a group of university students engaged in a study abroad experience and an elementary school classroom who use blogging as a blended learning tool to share their learning about Australia. This chapter attempts to explain how this informal, yet structured and intentional learning experience can serve as a model for educators who are hoping to implement hybrid or blended learning activities into their primary, secondary, or tertiary curriculum. To justify these claims, this chapter elucidates the power of weblogs as a tool of connection across both real and imagined boundaries and offer educators another instructional strategy that will help to transform and reconceptualize the concept of traditional classrooms. We found that this project can specifically inform the work of teachers, educators, or professionals who want to infuse online education into classroom practice and can highlight some of the benefits of online education for those in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

In Aboriginal culture, the creation story is referred to as the Dreamtime for the indigenous or first peoples of Australia. In fact, some scholars and anthropologists believe that it is in the “land down under” where human civilization began anywhere from 50,000-60,000 years ago. Some historians even go so far as to say 100,000 years ago:

Dreamtime is used for the remote past of the Spirit Ancestors, which lives in Aboriginal stories handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation...In song, story and poetry, art, drama, and dance, the Dreaming tells how the Spirit Ancestors formed and gave life to the land and laid down the Law—the structure of society, rituals to maintain the life of the land and rules for human behaviour (sic). (Parbury, 2005, p. 10)

A sense of “connectedness” has always been a central theme in the life of aboriginal people in Australia; a connection to land or country, a connection to plants and wildlife, and a connection to one another.

For Aboriginal people the Dreaming explains the origin of the universe, the workings of nature and the nature of humanity, the cycle of life and death. It shapes and structures Aboriginal life by regulating kinship, family life, and the relations between the sexes, with a network of obligations to people, land, and spirits. (Parbury, 2005, p.10)

Across Australia and the Torres Straits, different aboriginal groups identify with specific totems, or family, or clan emblems, which help to tell their story and connect them to country. Sometimes these totems are given at birth and take the form of animals. Examples of totems include the kangaroo, crocodile, stingray, dugong, dingo, and turtle. They play an especially important role in song and dance. Individuals from each of these respective totems embrace the animal, almost as their ancestor and identify with it on a cosmic level. According to James Welch, “Every individual has come from at least one Totemic Being, and these help define a person’s origins and connections with the world, their relationships with the past, present and future (Welch, 2011, p. 79).”

A key figure or symbol within the Dreamtime mythology is the Rainbow Serpent, which offers a metaphorical, and perhaps mystical, connection from the experience of the aboriginal people and the land. While Christian creation stories often portray the serpent in negative or evil ways, it is the Rainbow Serpent that is viewed as omniscient and all powerful as it weaves its way through the Dreamtime, sculpting the land, creating the rivers, and establishing the Law.

Oral traditions, such as the Dreamtime, are critical to the survival of the stories of indigenous people around the world and this is consistent with aboriginal people across Australia. Stories are told and connections to land are made through songlines and through dot landscape painting in addition to the ritual of storytelling about the various totems of this amazing and complex land.

But the value of oral traditions is not limited only to first nations, or indigenous peoples around the world. One could argue, they just happen to place a higher value on the perseverance of their stories because their stories have often been the counter-story to the dominator’s story. In other words, as a consequence of global conquest, many stories, especially those of some of the oldest cultures, have gone untold for far too long while history books have told the story of the dominator–or those in mainstream society. With that said, those in mainstream culture would benefit from an understanding of this need for indigenous people to preserve their stories and, through that understanding, come to appreciate their own. Only then can all stories and perspectives be valued.

One can argue that the telling of one’s story or history is of tremendous value to each of us and is imperative for the survival of all cultures around the world, including mainstream cultures.
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