

An arts-based learning model: Synergies of artist mentorship, ePortfolio and discovering “possible self”

Jennifer Rowley¹ and Jennifer Munday²

¹ Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, Macquarie Street, Sydney, New South Wales, 2000, email: jennifer.rowley@sydney.edu.au

² Faculty of Arts and Education, Charles Sturt University, Elizabeth Mitchell Drive, Albury, New South Wales, 2640, Australia

A successful learning model was adopted in a middle-years school in regional Australia, whereby Aboriginal artists are employed to work with students in a mentoring capacity creating original artworks and imparting knowledge of cultural heritage, symbols and techniques. ePortfolio thinking through reflective narratives was added to the art making/learning process, assisting students to establish a sense of possible self, both cultural and future thinking. Described here is school-based applied research where the learning model emerged as researchers collected qualitative data to measure the impact of webpages (the ePortfolio) to the art making. Data include interviews with key stakeholders, classroom observations, student artworks/stories, and webpages accompanying the culminating exhibition. Results showed that student engagement improved and cultural awareness was raised. The implications for pedagogy and practice include transferring the model to music, dance and media arts.

Keywords: learning engagement, education equity, digital narratives, creative arts pedagogy, ePortfolio, identity

Introduction and background

There exists a challenge surrounding engagement for Australian Aboriginal school students and, according to the 2019 Closing the Gap report, “attendance rates fall throughout the secondary grades, declining with increasing year levels” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 54). The report states that a greater awareness of identity and connection to background contributes significantly to Aboriginal students developing a positive sense of a future “possible self” (Bennett et al., 2017) and thus contributes to their learning engagement, health and wellbeing through enabling educational equity. Dreise (2017) paints an optimistic picture for early education of Australian Aboriginal children, with more four-year-olds attending pre-school than ever before, coupled with the warning that “Indigenous children were twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the AEDC [Australian Early Development Census] developmental domains (physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge)”. The progress achieved for early childhood education is tangible and provides a valuable lens to continue an upward trajectory of educational equity.

The situation, however, for Aboriginal adolescents at middle-school level has remained unchanged. Therefore, engagement strategies to encourage students to continue their learning become very important in these vulnerable adolescent years. Adolescent students have many needs for continued engagement, including understanding and involvement in learning about themselves, culture and community. The learning model development described in this article assesses the impact of combining creative art practice with ePortfolio thinking and processes to improve school retention, digital literacies and cultural knowledge for Australian Aboriginal secondary-school students in low socioeconomic status (SES) regional schools.

ePortfolios are becoming more widely used as flexible storehouses for students to collect evidence of learning and documentation of achievement. The authors have engaged in two pilot research projects at a middle-years school in rural Victoria, Australia, since 2017. The first pilot project succeeded in adding student webpages, created by the researchers, to the student art making (Munday & Rowley, 2019). The webpages were not quite to the extent of a student ePortfolio (a system for building webpages with written narratives and evidence of creativity), although students were introduced to the ePortfolio process and thinking. From their years of designing and implementing the pedagogic practice of ePortfolio thinking in higher education, the researchers proposed adding student-created ePortfolios to this art making/learning process to immerse students in establishing a sense of “self”, both cultural and future thinking (Rowley et al., 2018).

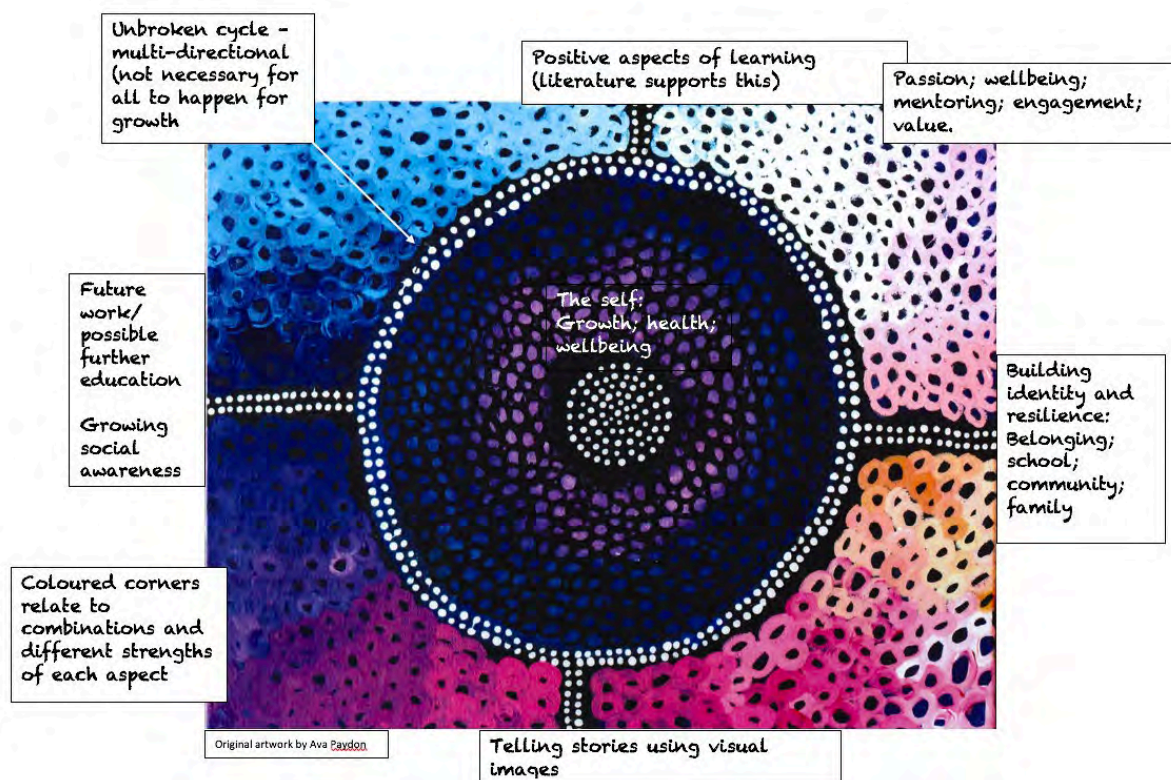
The second pilot project in 2018-19 encouraged Aboriginal students to continue their learning trajectory through a program (mentored by Aboriginal artists) in creative arts making and digital literacy developed by documenting creative arts activities in ePortfolios. The creation by students of a digital narrative to accompany the visual artefacts allows both students and teachers to share and respond to each other's learning. With the researchers' institutional funding for art supplies and employment of a Koorie¹ artist, the learning model implemented during scheduled class time consists of student art making and learning about culture through the mentoring of the Koorie artist, with the addition of the creation of a personal webpage or digital portfolio to document students' learning. The students exemplified the potential of exploring future “possible selves” through the curation of artistic artefacts accompanied by short written narratives.

The research question for the second pilot project described here was “How can an ePortfolio enhance the learning engagement of an Aboriginal adolescent through mentored creative arts making?”. One outcome of this second pilot project was the identification of an effective learning model of particular benefit to secondary students identifying as Aboriginal. The development of the learning model described in this article articulates the impact of combining creative art practice with the pedagogy of ePortfolio thinking and processes to improve school retention, digital literacies and cultural knowledge for under-represented populations such as Aboriginal school students in low SES regional schools in Victoria. The art class current learning situation evolved from students seeking refuge during lunch breaks in their daily routine, with an empathetic teacher who was willing to support and supervise their interest in creating art.

The process of this method of learning through mentoring allowed positive engagement outcomes to emerge and these are presented in the diagram below (Figure 1). The authors used an original artwork by a student to visually represent the outcomes of the pilot project.

¹ Koori/e is a demonym for Indigenous Australians from the approximate region of New South Wales and Victoria.

Figure 1. Arts-Based Learning Model



Taking the centre of the diagram and following the roads out, we see the specific aspects of student learning engagement and measured learning outcomes in the art class. The four main components of the model (for example, growing social awareness) assist the students to build possible self, whereas the other side is the building of personal identity and resilience. The coloured corners are combinations and strengths of each aspect—passion, wellbeing, engagement and the value of being mentored. The students, as the central kernel of the diagram and the circle, may be tracking through, and therefore within, the unbroken cycle at any point of their learning. Following that, the colours have the potential to make different combinations at different times of student learning, engagement and success.

An earlier report of the Closing the Gap Strategy in 2018 revealed that there was an increase in the number of Australian Aboriginal children attending pre-school, but attendance rates were in decline as year levels increased, so issues with attendance among Aboriginal adolescents at middle-school level persist (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). For example, 40 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal students are absent for between four and 16 weeks per year (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, 2016) and, nationally, only 65 per cent of Aboriginal young people complete senior high school, compared to 86 per cent of non-Aboriginal students (ABS, 2017). Historical factors influence educational disengagement for Aboriginal student populations (for example, historical lack of access to schooling for Aboriginal people and the intergenerational barriers presented by families with histories of not finishing high school).

Along with these noted challenges of school attendance and learning engagement is that of literacy. Digital literacies have proven to be a successful engagement strategy for young people disengaged from education (Wallace, 2011). Beyond school, digital literacies enable people to find employment, improve

their education, access services and connect socially. An array of organisations are trying to address the issue of improving Aboriginal literacy capacity, although it is not clear from the New South Wales Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (NSW Department of Education, 2017) how improved educational outcomes are to be reached. Standardised testing provides a convenient and available literacy and numeracy measurement tool, but results of these tests are problematic because of bias towards the dominant culture in Australia. Individual Education Plans (IEP) are common practice in NSW and Victorian schools, and yet these rarely address the knowledge of culture, heritage and belonging. For adolescent Australian Aboriginal students, digital literacy therefore represents an opportunity for continued engagement, including understanding and involvement in learning about Aboriginal culture and community (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018).

Literature review

There are broadening fields of thought and research around the topic of engaging adolescents in learning. Our own research in this area explores the topics of sense of “possible self”, building identity, ePortfolios/webpages, growing social citizenship and transitioning student to professional.

Sense of “possible self” and building identity

A study by Kickett-Tucker (2009) showed that strong racial identity can improve the mental health of Indigenous children and youth; however, in many cases, “vulnerable children and youth have accepted the wider community’s negative perceptions of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian such that these ideas have become part of their own ideas of being Indigenous” (p. 130). At the school where the pilot research was conducted (and is described in this article) many children will not identify as “Indigenous”. Attending the art class allows engagement in learning about Aboriginal culture by being immersed in an environment where the stories, histories and social mores are held in positive esteem. Hattie and Donoghue (2016) proposed a learning framework which includes the transfer of knowledge and understanding from one personal state to a newer state (p. 4). The differences perceived by the students in the Aboriginal art class around the presentation of knowledge from traditional culture to the present day enabled them to see themselves in a new way.

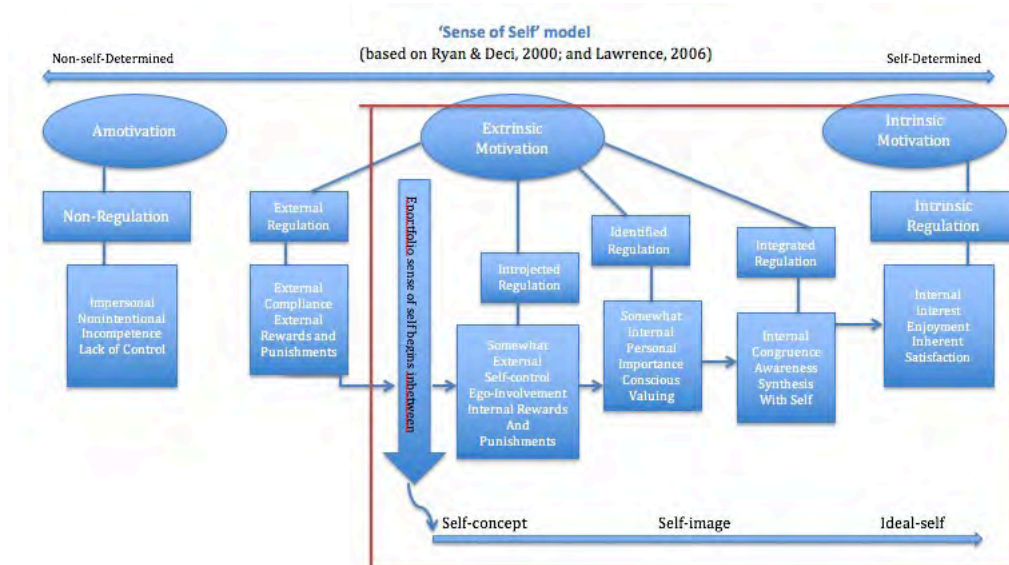
Earlier findings in recent studies remain consistent; for example, a study in 2012 found that “what appears central to the healthy and successful development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is learning about their culture and understanding that this culture and its connections can sit within a mainstream, Western cultural context” (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012, p. 25). Further, at the 2018 Heywire Regional Youth Summit it was resolved that youth connecting with elders to learn about traditional foods and eating together would be an essential way to celebrate and learn about Indigenous culture. One of the attendees said, “I learned to show my Aboriginal background through art, didgeridoo playing, stories, culture, and Aboriginal songs and dances.” (ABC, 2018) This recognition shows that young people appreciate connecting with elders and learning about their traditions and are aware of the gap between the knowledge of the elders and current youth.

Dobia and Roffey (2017) conducted a study with an Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) and noted that “a strong sense of cultural identity is associated with wellbeing benefits, [and] ongoing racism can perversely strengthen cultural identity but undermine wellbeing and academic engagement” (p. 319). Like the Aboriginal art class, the AGC aims to “develop their sense of agency, leadership and community

connection" (p. 322). These authors concluded that we need to provide the space and support with community elders to build "a sense of agency and cultural pride" (p. 327).

Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are the selves that people would like to become, expect to become, and wish not to become. Researchers of possible "self" have demonstrated the value of this approach in helping learners find the relevance of their learning and in driving motivation (Hardgrove et al., 2015). At the crux of possible selves is an empirically grounded conclusion that imagined futures only produce motivated action when there is viable self-regulation that can be directed towards desirable future states. The literature detailing youth resilience building indicates that available pathways and supports that enable and facilitate self-regulation toward sustainable livelihoods are quite thin, inconsistent, or missing in the lives of many young people (Donovan, 2015). To this end, we include the sense of self model (Rowley & Munday, 2014).

Figure 2. Sense of Self Model (Rowley & Munday, 2014)



The sense of self model in Figure 2 indicates the role of ePortfolio in contributing to one's future possible self via self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and self-concept (Lawrence, 2006). Parks et al. (2013) explain that "the ePortfolio creation process not only helps facilitate autonomous, creative and intellectual thinking but also offers possibilities for encouraging interaction and collaboration" (p. 108).

We know that ePortfolio has the potential to engage diverse learners (Wallace, 2011). Previous work by the authors showed "that students producing ePortfolios embedded in curriculum tend to move through the descriptors in the bounded red rectangle, from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation" (Rowley et al., 2018, p. 55), as in Figure 2. ePortfolios facilitate self-directed learning by allowing a user to collect evidence, reflect on learning and curate their personal learning space for outside audiences to read. The versatility of the ePortfolio enables collecting and organising evidence and artefacts to demonstrate understanding. Acquisition of skills can be flexibly showcased for different audiences through a versatile ePortfolio platform, giving the creator the ability to present their "self" appropriately and specifically (Rowley & Munday, 2014). Thus, the ePortfolio, in providing a scaffold to build digital literacies through reflective practice, offers significant possibilities for addressing literacy and learning engagement shortfalls.

ePortfolios versus webpages

ePortfolios have been used in each level of education, but predominate in higher education where tertiary students may be required to present an ePortfolio of skills and developed knowledge over the course of their degree in order to gain accreditation to a profession (for example, nursing and teaching). Use of the ePortfolio in primary schools and early childhood centres replaces collections of paper evidence of achievement and development through levels of skill acquisition and knowledge competence. Apart from creative arts and design where they also replace the paper form, digital portfolios have now emerged as a learning tool in secondary education.

Youth from all cultures are somewhat familiar with digital technologies through social media and yet they are utilised inconsistently in school. We are dealing with a generation of digital-engagers with students on social media, and teaching within the web environment provides a tool for current and prospective student engagement inside the online universe. Using social media effectively should expand market scope, increase student recruitment and drive engagement. Indigenous youth living remotely are no exception, particularly through mobile technologies, social media and internet connections to shared community spaces (Kral, 2010). Community groups are using webpages to share knowledge and provide information, including cultural knowledge; for example, KARI Aboriginal Support Services use a webpage to communicate their services, which includes a cultural unit that offers vacation care, cultural camps and cultural training. Based in Sydney, vacation care includes “cultural excursions to significant Aboriginal sites... an Indigenous art program... an Aboriginal dance program... a didgeridoo program... a basket-weaving program... [with] involvement and endorsement from various Aboriginal community members and elders” (KARI Limited, 2018).

In a similar way, a webpage is being used for communication by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI) so Aboriginal communities can see the plans and strategies that are being put in place for addressing issues in educating Indigenous youth in Victoria (VAEAI, n.d.). Webpages have the potential to become documents for Aboriginal communities to communicate with each other and make available resources to assist in enhancing life and cultural issues. Williams (2018), in an article describing a framework for evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs, named webpages as key forms of data to be included “to best understand ways of working” (p. 15).

Growing social citizens: Lifelong learning

Part of a student managing their own learning is focused on gathering and selecting evidence of developing skills and attributes, and weaving these together to tell a story about who “Am I” to a particular audience (Munday & Rowley, 2019). Learning is a wonderful experience and engagement in learning about anything is an experience that stays with you for life. Hence, the concept of the lifelong learner or a person who loves to learn. As Dreise (2017) notes, “If Australia wants to close the gap in education, then we cannot afford to look at schooling in a vacuum to other socioeconomic factors.” Within this context, we might consider the notion of how we as educators contribute to the growth of citizens who love to learn—for life. Sometimes we are caught in a dialogue of what exactly are we developing our students for in terms of future participation in our society, and we focus only on career. It is pertinent to consider, therefore, the question of how educators, as part of their social citizenship, can engage students with others so that learning is collaborative, as it is optimal for students to understand the community in which they live and work (Bennett et al., 2017). Therefore, the citizen scholar is one who has been involved in contemporary pedagogical approaches and has developed sufficient competence to carry on as an independent learner in the future (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016). Consider the argument around deep and surface learning which pervades much of the literature on pedagogic practices. At the same time, consider the notion that schools today are consistently accused of dumbing

down curriculum for the benefit of inclusion. It is important for all students beyond the Western corpus to better understand the ideas that are inherent in the world (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016). One of these is the understanding of our intangible cultural heritage and the realisation of becoming a contributor to whole society cultural consciousness. Here then, there is a potential impact of curriculum to develop these competencies for social citizenship to thrive beyond their “disciplinary reach” (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 43).

Learning can become a universal language, but what we teach in school is not universal; it is a privileged selection of “stuff” that is rarely retained, poorly acknowledged and seen as useful by many students. It is sadly inferior to learning about yourself through experiences or stories (Rowley et al., 2018). An ePortfolio could be seen as a generic term used to refer to these kinds of stories (or presentations) about yourself, regardless of media. An ePortfolio is, therefore, a digital version of such a story (that is, the presentation and accompanying evidence is stored and retrieved digitally, for example, through a website). Software and system providers of digital literacies and personal learning spaces, such as PebblePad, use the term “portfolio”, and many use the word “folios” as a generic term to cover ePortfolios, portfolios and webfolios. How do we best train students to be good citizens for the good of the world? Healthy aspiration is what citizenship means, and providing aspiration through a lived experience of motivation, self-worth and tolerance of others is a great start.

Transitioning students to professionals

Explicit movement along a continuum towards becoming a professional is a difficult concept for young adults who are only managing to be students. Rowley et al. (2016) posed a dilemma faced by students who are preparing to transition from life as a student to that of one who is utilising the expertise learnt as a student into a professional world. They conclude that the space between the two roles is a complex one that is often fraught with difficulty. The mentors working with mentees in the pilot projects detailed in this article need to take ownership of facilitating learning within leadership, seeing their students not only as they are now, but also how they might be in the future, could be empowering for the development of the lifelong learner.

A mentoring program described by Judith Brown (Rowley & Bennett, 2019) raises two critical questions about her innovative response to a global question of ensuring safety for young adults celebrating the end of their schooling time. First, she asks how can we ensure collaborative extra-curricular programs have longevity? Second, she poses the question of developing student leadership through explicit mentoring within an authentic community context by those who are of a similar age group to the mentees. This community-designed program utilises the creative and performing arts to deliver messages of safety, support and peer obligations through art, dance and music. The key implication for supporting this type of leadership aligns with employability potential as professionals engaging in mentoring to save and influence lives.

The relationship of the literature to our research

Previous research into “sense of self” and ePortfolios with university students first led the authors to propose the use of ePortfolios in the Aboriginal art class (Rowley & Munday, 2014). The narratives written by the students when their artwork was publicly exhibited showed how they briefly explained the story of the work, sometimes related to family or community activities, and, where possible, identified the Aboriginal community their family belonged to (Munday & Rowley, 2019). Some stories revealed that students had learned about belonging to a particular nation through the process of art

making with the Aboriginal artist mentor. The identification of “possible selves” noted by Markus and Nurius (1986) “derive[s] from representations of the self in the past.” (p. 954). The link to the past and the present provoked the idea that the addition of ePortfolio, with its potential of documenting processes of narrating and demonstrating the self through evidence of accomplishment and ideas, could help progress the student thinking to future possible selves.

The public exhibition of student artwork from the Aboriginal art class raises the student’s sense of self-esteem both individually and collectively. The work is of quality, exhibited together as a community of practice, and the works make a statement for the important place Aboriginal culture has, or should have, for all Australians in our current society (Munday & Rowley, 2019). Visitors to the exhibition include family members, other school students and their families, other Aboriginal community members, local education authorities, teachers and others interested in Aboriginal art and art making. The community elders support of the event further reinforces students’ sense of self and belonging, and “racial identity” (Kickett-Tucker, 2009, p. 121).

Throughout the two pilot projects the authors have faced and solved challenges, mostly technological, in the process to add ePortfolio or webpages to the learning model presented in this article. One of the key features of an ePortfolio is the ability to share widely all or part of the created and narrated pages about the student. In order to share with community members who attended the annual exhibition, the webpages were temporarily published to the internet with closed URLs and then given Quick Response (QR) codes (see Figure 3 below). By using their smartphones, viewers could quickly access the webpages and see pictures and videos of the students at work on their art, as well as the art narratives and information about the students. This form of information sharing helps the young students understand the power of digital storytelling and the wide usage and access community can have through digital technologies to web creations of their making.

Figure 3. QR code linking to WMYC Koorie Art Class webpage



At the end of the second pilot project the webpages were made in collaboration with the students. In future versions the students of the Aboriginal visual and performing arts class will be wholly responsible for documenting their own art making through photographed images, scanned drafts, explanatory texts, and publishing and sharing their pages through the web and with community.

Method

The approach was a mixed method design, as the data collected in the second pilot project consisted of recorded and transcribed interviews of the teachers who have worked with the students in the art class; photographic and note-taking observations by the researchers within the classroom environment; the student artworks, stories and responses; and the webpages created together with the students to accompany the 2018 exhibition. These methods were chosen because data could be collected whilst being engaged with the progress of the Aboriginal art class.

It was important to record interviews at various points throughout the project. At the beginning of the project the identified learning model was shown to teaching staff and the discussion and feedback recorded. Participants were five employed teachers, one Aboriginal artist mentor and 21 students. Teaching staff changed in one class, and at the mid-point of the year several students chose different subjects and left the class, while others joined. Several short interviews were recorded with students regarding their progress in the art making and about the inspiration behind their works. The interviews had a dual purpose: research data, as well as being useful for the student webpages. In addition, the photographic documentation allowed a record of student progress to be made and, at the same time, contributed to the webpages, as students mostly recorded the progress of their work, not of themselves working. In a phenomenological analysis of these data, the stories behind the works respond to the relationship built between student and the Aboriginal artist, and the words chosen to explain the images reflect the learning about Indigenous cultures.

The webpages have provided an excellent source of data and towards the end of the second pilot project several students began to work independently in creating and arranging photographs and text on the webpages. PebblePad, the makers of the ePortfolio product used in the pilots, are always improving aspects of the platform and students found it increasingly easy to upload images and text to their virtual workspaces and arrange the materials on a page by using the PebblePocket application. Examples of these data are presented in the next section (Table 1) to illustrate the way the arts-based learning model works.




Results and discussion




1. Class observation – Classrooms are dynamic ecosystems where individuals come together as collectives in pursuit of common outcomes. The artist mentors working with students in the Aboriginal art class have no specific pedagogical training and this appears to make no difference to the learning outcomes observed in the class. Much of the class time is spent in informal chatter amongst the students who comment on what they are doing and why. During these times of informal dialogue, the artist mentor uses ideas gleaned from students to scaffold either cultural knowledge or artist techniques.
2. Webpages – The students used an app(lication) called PebblePocket, created by PebblePad, to save and send artefacts or assets straight through to the web account of their ePortfolio. Using the app meant they could take photos of their work in a progressive manner and have them to choose from for their webpage. Inside the web application it was easy for them to place images and text on a page. The researchers collaborated on adding short interview questions to help create a series of pages to inform viewers about the student and the work. The following webpage was created with a student who attended the art class for two years and moved to the senior college (Years 10-12) at the end of 2018. The student is one of several who have found they have an aptitude for art and have become interested in pursuing it beyond the art class.
3. Interviews with artist mentors and classroom-based art teachers – The short interviews with the art teachers and the Aboriginal artist emphasised several key points and revealed that the students appreciated being able to use good quality art making materials that are suitable for creating exhibition-standard works. They noted that students were able to absorb aspects of Aboriginal culture and relate the stories to their personal lives. As the students learn the symbolism of colours and forms and resolve questions of aesthetics, they mentor each other. Students who have been in the class for more than a year, and sometimes after moving to senior high school, actively mentor new students in the class for mutual

benefit. The expression in the artwork and ePortfolio is a channel for youth, engaging in acts of peer mentoring and in their emotions and growth. Students have been able to create relationships with several Aboriginal artist mentors. The standard of the final work is high, since the students know the ultimate aim is an authentic product when they exhibit the work. The exhibition has occurred annually for three years, so students are confident there will be a culminating event. Several students who have participated in the Aboriginal art class chose to study a visual art subject at senior high school and have been confident to exhibit their work independently at Aboriginal art gallery spaces (and include the QR code linking to their webpage). Teachers are actively encouraging students who could benefit to join the class.

4. Artwork with narratives – Samples of student artworks are tabled below with the student narrative divided between evidence of cultural knowledge and aspects that describe themselves.

Table 1. Examples of ePortfolio content created by students

Student artwork	Cultural knowledge	Sense of self
<p><i>Sunset over the tracks</i></p> 	As the sun sets, the kangaroo tracks fade away.	I painted this because it reminds me of some of my childhood memories.
<p><i>The sea turtles</i></p> 	I have used a mix of traditional and non-traditional painting techniques to bring certain things in my painting to the front.	I chose the sea turtles because they represent freedom of choice and opportunities. They can swim wherever they choose and their future is their own.
<p><i>Stored memory</i></p> 	The red strip with the white lines represents the tree branches surrounding the store that the painting was in and the yellow, red and white lines represent the path I was walking on when I saw the artwork.	This painting represents a memory from when I was younger and lived in Sydney. I went to a market where a lady was selling an art piece of a kangaroo on a light brown canvas and I have no idea why that memory has stayed with me.
<p><i>The ocean – Wiradjuri-Ngurambang tribe</i></p>	The lake has inspired my painting. I've made the waves bigger than	My Nan lives on the edge of Lake Cargelligo in NSW.

		<p>they normally are to make my painting look more like the ocean.</p>	<p>We go there every holiday.</p>
<p><i>Star gazing</i></p> 		<p>As the fox looks up into the stars. He wonders what the other creatures are up to under the blanket of twilight.</p>	<p>I was inspired partially by my love of wolves and foxes and wanted to blend that with the Indigenous symbol and dot style of story creation.</p>
<p><i>Family tree</i></p> 		<p>My artwork is an Indigenous family tree.</p>	<p>Each branch represents my family members and the paths they have taken in life with our home in the centre. I used these colours because they are bright, warm, cool and dark to show all the different aspects of family life.</p>

5. Arts-based learning model: transition from process to engagement in learning – The school-based coordinator of the Aboriginal art class, Lee², reflected on the value and impact of the learning model and stated: “This is great. So, you are looking at it radiating out and covering these different areas.”

When asked about the choice of student artwork for the model (Figure 1), Lee noted: “Yes, well, I love the idea. I thought that was the one. If you’re going to pick one of the images that’s somehow representative of growth and reproduction of an idea in ever widening circles.”

It was intentional that the art club was created to build engagement in learning and that the model wanted to capture this, as stated by Lee: “We’ve got these multiple kinds of prongs going on. And I guess those prongs in that image kind of mirror that idea of reaching out or reaching in. You can go either way, can’t you?”

² Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

When asked why she started the Aboriginal art club, Lee replied:

It was accidental, to a large extent, but it's also a product of that environment where you've got the leader, the artist, the adult, and they're just mirroring the adult world for the kids... growing and learning at the same time.

Although literacy development was not an original intended outcome of the Aboriginal art class, the school is excited by the digital literacy focus the ePortfolio thinking introduced, as noted by Lee:

It's definitely a sort of literacy for the kids. But in terms of just your nitty-gritty words, well, that's storytelling, we captured that through the storytelling and that was really important to have that dimension because we still are educators. But yeah, the emotional intelligence thing is being harnessed really well, I think.

So much of what we as educators set out to achieve by introducing the ePortfolio is captured in the arts-based learning model as a representation of lifelong learning and social citizenship. Lee noted:

I think it's the total person, for sure... it's almost like the diagram that accounts for what's successful and what's working. But I would say I very much agree [that] it's student-centred and the student is at the centre.

When the Aboriginal artist mentor was asked about the focus emerging on cultural consciousness, the answer was:

Yes, because from my observations of [x] when [x] first arrived, she lacked connection to the place. And it's only through her embracing her Aboriginality that she's felt connected, because she's had the personal connection and interest, but the external kind of framework was provided without our real focus here on Koori programs and Koori education. And, like, the Sorry Ceremony is nothing big, but that exemplified her passion to connect to her culture and she saw it being embraced by the school, and I think that brought that degree of connection and happiness that you wouldn't get otherwise.

Lee was asked about the focus emerging on cultural consciousness in the learning model and responded:

It's trying to get them engaged in school, to acknowledge and embrace their culture, and for the non-Indigenous kids to feel that it's a really important and rich culture and to kind of build that respect. So, everything about it has this sense of radiating out. You see that with students over the years that, if they can carve out a role, that gives them purpose, centeredness, and there's a good reason to exist, somehow, which is so important.

As the champion of the Aboriginal art club in the middle school, Lee feels it is important that the program is seen to have longevity, purpose and is consistently meeting the emerging and current educational outcomes because "it's all for their benefit". The arts-based learning model captures much of what has been achieved and invites future developments within the artist mentor relationship, peer mentoring opportunities and the ever-growing community partnerships. So much of what is considered beneficial education is in the building of respect, trust and acceptance within our learners.

When reflecting on the research question for the second pilot project, and after choosing the artwork that diagrammed the learning model, we noted that if you see learning as growth and reproduction, then that

is represented as the nucleus or the person starting. That is why it is labelled the self, the growth, the health and the wellbeing. We see those things as all coming in to the model's flexibility and adaptability because it is represented as an unbroken cycle. The idea of the model still being a visual telling of the story through the visual images is perhaps the future of learning engagement growth and students building a future for themselves as lifelong learners.

For example, one student was extremely shy and insecure, and had very low self-esteem. She began as a 13-year-old (Year 7) in the Aboriginal art class in her first year at the middle-years school. With encouragement from the Aboriginal artist mentor through gaining of cultural knowledge and working with like-minded peers, the student has flourished. She has been mentored by the Aboriginal artist and she, in turn, now provides advice and mentoring to other members of the class.

Art class co-ordinator Lee has observed connections between students' learning engagement and their wellbeing:

It was noted that students took ownership of the learning, and it was personal to each one for different reasons. For example, one student's grandmother had just passed away and she wanted to try and unpack and represent that in her art somehow, which was part of her own healing and her own wellbeing and her own health.

The success of the program goes beyond the classroom walls, as students who respond in this positive way are chosen as participants in other official activities, both by the school and the local Aboriginal community. Their social standing and awareness are expanded, building towards growth, resilience, future work and achievement.

Conclusion

The arts-based learning model discussed represents, amongst other aspects, a positive cycle of learning engagement, health and wellbeing, growth, resilience and cultural consciousness. As a mentoring partnership with community and artist, and between the students, school and artist, the students see professionals at work. It was noted that developing a sense of self through the artworks and the accompanying narratives contributed to being a social citizen and lifelong learner, and community awareness emerged. The results are very encouraging and the researchers are working towards a full implementation of the learning model, Aboriginal art making with ePortfolio, in a range of new schools that will see the transfer of the model not only to other schools, but to the other art forms of music and dance.

Middle schools, in particular, are grappling with ways to "close the gap", and the inclusion of ePortfolio as a way of thinking in addition to developing an aspect of digital literacy has shown to engage learners in different ways to learn. The project benefit is shown to match the Victorian Department of Education's learning wellbeing, engagement, aspirations and achievement, social equity, education access and educational transitions, and it is expected the model's core outcomes will match other education departments' student learning strategic goals. The learning model derived from the second pilot project has provided significant benefits, such as enhanced cultural knowledge, socio-emotional wellbeing, and potential pathways to lifelong learning and social citizenship. As Lee observed:

I guess that's something that, you know, you harvest all these by-products, and we didn't really intend that. The intention was to just see what the possibilities were, knowing that the

cell of the idea was all about growing the kids' own strengths and confidence through, not numeracy or literacy, but really through that non-verbal visuospatial kind of awareness that, well, it's supposed to be one of the main intelligences.

Potential constraints to any in-school program such as is described in this article include funding, human resources and school executive support. Both pilots have exemplified the potential for partnerships to become sustainable through careful planning with essential service partners. Observable and evidenced benefits are local Aboriginal culture enriched through enhanced learning and arts making by participating middle-school students; the status of Aboriginal culture and arts making raised within the learning communities; sustained digital resources demonstrating mentoring characteristics in Aboriginal arts making archived throughout the ePortfolio; and increased engagement through participating students' acquisition of improved digital literacy skills via the ePortfolio process and thinking. It is expected that participating students have a greater intention to stay longer at school and will develop aspirations such as employment and potentially consider tertiary education. The learning model has the capacity to be adopted as a successful educational practice into policy, as detailed in the Closing the Gap and Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan documents.

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About the authors

Jennifer Rowley, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Music Education with special interests in the areas of learning technologies, cognitive and behavioral development, learning and teaching in higher education, identity development for graduates and the impact of ePortfolio on student engagement. Jennifer lectures in pedagogy and curriculum, cognitive and adolescent development, and social and professional issues for musicians and teachers. She is committed to students' professional learning and how individual cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral needs of all learners can be met in a diverse range of educational settings, including the digital environment. Jennifer presents at national and international conferences and publishes on ensuring graduates develop a salient identity, understanding the changing nature of today's workplace and the use of digital technologies.

Jennifer Munday, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Australia's largest regional university. She has been teaching in the disciplines of Creative Arts and Technology for many years. Jennifer's academic work and contribution are "focused on Innovation" (University Strategy 2017-2020) and she has built a reputation within and beyond the CSU community as progressive in online, flexible and distance education. Her contributions include publication and investigation in the scholarship of teaching in online learning, particularly in regard to the value of ePortfolios and reflective practice. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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