

**Parallel session 2: Main challenges in the coexistence between native  
knowledge and modern science**

**MAKING SENSE: COMMUNICATION THROUGH ENGAGEMENT**

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**Key words:** Native knowledge, culture and communication

**Text**

As an Aboriginal man involved in the research industry in Australia and in communicating research findings, I have a keen appreciation of why research has such a bad name among my Indigenous brothers and sisters around the world.

We've been objects of research and not participants and so researchers rarely appreciate what they can learn from us.

They don't give us feedback because they're not really engaged with us in the first place.

I set up a video production unit at a prestige health research unit in Northern Australia to try and correct this problem because video is a good medium for telling stories and I know that's how our people learn.

We start learning from a very early age to use our senses to make sense of the world.

The story telling part has always worked because I know how to do it.

I always try to use local Indigenous people as my video crew to build on skills they already have and get them involved in telling the story.

That means they tell it their way.

I want researchers to go further than just using video.

I want them to understand that they need to approach Aboriginal people as potential partners and then as people who are in a position to exchange knowledge about the particular problems that interest the researcher.

We need to promote respect for Indigenous intellectual traditions and respect for Indigenous ways of doing things.

And we need to promote the idea that research is about exchange and development for all the people involved.

For me, research is not a product and communicating knowledge from research isn't about selling a product.

It's all a process of engagement.

In Aboriginal terms, people belong to groups and they have to collaborate for survival or they die. This is still an expectation among Aboriginal people from all kinds of social and cultural environments today - remote, urban, rural. Individual action, without reference to others, was virtually unknown. People understood that survival needs collaboration and cooperation.

In our terms, people who do research do it on their own. They gather skills and knowledge which they claim to own and which they don't necessarily share. They have control over their domain – a wealth of knowledge and experience, kudos, the ability to attract funds for projects. These help them survive and prosper in the academic world. They don't always help them negotiate their way successfully through the Aboriginal worlds, though.

Aboriginal people's experience of research reflects these cultural differences. I've seen two ways of doing research. You can call them good and bad, positive and negative or whatever opposites you can think of. But they boil down to:

- on the one side, a collective, inclusive and collaborative approach that is directed and managed by the Aboriginal people involved in and affected by the research; and
- on the other the individual-centred, exclusive approach that is driven by the needs of the researcher.

But 'research' isn't a value: it's a series of processes and activities. And because it involves people, it needs to engage people and accommodate them. When you're gathering new knowledge from among people of a different culture – doing 'research', then you need to make sure it is useful, it can give people knowledge and insights and generally add to the human story that we all share.

In the process of thinking these things through, I began to think about how researchers approached people in communities and how they left them at the end of the research process. The researcher-oriented approach seems to have involved people coming in with their minds made up about what *they* want to do, and their objective is to talk Aboriginal people round to seeing things their way and agree to their agenda and their timeframe.

This approach is called '**consultation**'. But consultation doesn't mean much to Aboriginal people. Because it means you, the researcher or government official or businessman, doing what you wanted to do in the first place. It means leaving little room for people to tell their stories. It's not about communicating in an appropriate way. And the appropriate way is **negotiation**.

People 'consulting' might also bring printed material to support their argument - brochures, pamphlets, posters etc – which they're familiar with and which they might use to tell their story to a non-Indigenous audience. That audience is familiar with, and comfortable with, the idea that you absorb information through bits of paper.

There is a place for printed material, sure. But it's probably a waste of time if people can't speak or read formal English, which is the way researchers try to

transmit project information. For most Aboriginal people the oral tradition is what still counts.

Part of the blackfella way of doing things is to sit down and talk: people develop stories to identify problems, discuss courses of action and negotiate agreement on what needs to be done. Everyone gets heard, no matter how long it takes. Aboriginal people have a rich oral tradition – a way of negotiating information by talking it through until everyone has had a say and everyone's satisfied.

What matters is the story (the research agenda): how the team can develop it, how it incorporates other people's stories and how you reach agreement over all the detail. You can't do any of this without having a real relationship that blurs the distinction between 'researchers' and the 'researched'.

My experience of working with researchers has had its share of ups and downs. The really basic questions still keep cropping up, like:

Who gets empowered?

Whose skills get developed?

Who owns and manages the process?

What happens to the information – does it get taken away for good or does it come back?

Who gets the accolades?

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