

Case Study

Preserving Yorta Yorta Language in Goulburn Murray



Background

Being able to speak your own home language with a degree of capability is undeniably linked with one's sense of identity, their wellbeing and self-esteem. In the Goulburn Murray, language and traditional cultural practise are all but gone; the last census identified just six people who spoke Yorta Yorta language. This is not only a local issue, but a nation wide issue with the loss of more than 100 languages since colonisation, of which the majority of the last surviving languages are severely endangered.

Whilst still in the process of establishing themselves as a hub for welfare reform for Aboriginal people in the Goulburn-Murray region, the Kaiela Institute recognises that building opportunities for economic advancement must go hand in hand with developing self confidence and pride in Aboriginal identity. Speaking your own language supports individual affirmation and self worth, both of which are important factors to consider when it comes to the capacity of an individual to participate in the economy.

The Kaiela Institute identified language awareness as a gap in the existing community program offering. On the back of a very modest philanthropic donation to the Kaiela Institute in June 2012, the Yorta Yorta language pilot commenced. This 12-week pilot brought together five local adults to learn basic Yorta Yorta language. Program Developer and Coordinator, Sharon Atkinson acknowledged the major challenge for Aboriginal people in mainstream learning environments and as such designed a program that would be culturally appropriate. The structure involved a predominantly oral exchange of language, set in a small group environment during the participants' lunch time.

Approaching the end of the 12-week pilot, the impact on the individuals who had taken part in the program was clear, however it needed a particular set of skills to articulate its success and secure funding for the program going forward.

Jawun sourced Jade Carson from the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC). Jade had the responsibility of information management and design, document quality and control in her day job, combined with 2 years as a foreign language teacher in Japan. Jade commented, "My skill set was nicely matched to the brief, it was bringing together my past and present work experiences and also my personal experiences".

Approach

During the last few weeks of the pilot, Jade worked alongside Sharon Atkinson to review and capture the highlights and outcomes of the pilot. Commenting on Jade's approach, Sharon Atkinson said "Jade came with an open mind and put another perspective on the program..."

When you are working singlehandedly, you don't get an opportunity to step back and think objectively".

Taking into consideration the small participant numbers, Jade produced a thorough qualitative analysis by shadowing the program coordinator through the last few weeks of the pilot and interviewing every participant on the program. The end result was a high quality case study, which would be used to demonstrate the program's success, and support the Kaiela Institute in securing further funding to continue the program.

Outcomes

When Kaiela Institute CEO, Stephen Iles and Sharon Atkinson met with the Office for the Arts funding body, Sharon commented, "...It was definitely the evaluation that blew them away... They were immediately writing the program with us and clearly willing to stay engaged".

Office for the Arts representative, Susie Kerr was so impressed by the overall program and the high quality delivery of the review that she immediately committed to funding the program. The Office of the Arts encouraged the Kaiela Institute to apply for a further three year funding grants when the next round became open for applications.

According to Stephen Iles, "The timely injection of skills like Jade's resulted in us securing a further 12 months funding to continue to build the language program, incorporating learning's from the pilot and expand its reach to more people in the community".

Reinforcing the importance of keeping this program alive is apparent through reviewing the impact that learning language has had on the participants. For Heidi Knowles, her learning has been particularly significant, as her confidence has grown, so too have her achievements. Since participating in the language program, Heidi has entered into local writing competitions, published a children's book in Yorta Yorta language and now visits local primary schools to read her book to children. When speaking about learning her language and publishing her own book, Heidi commented that "...Now I can pass on Yorta Yorta language to my five kids and know that culture will remain for generations to come through our language".

The experience had a lasting impact on Jade as well, "It was a privilege to work on something like this and quite emotional to observe someone discover themselves through learning their language...it is quite monumental to save a language".

Next Steps

The Yorta Yorta language case study has since been distributed locally to gauge interest from other Indigenous groups in the region. With long-term funding looking secure, in 2013, the program looks set to capture a wider audience, and will work with the local Indigenous Academy of Sport, Health and Education (ASHE), Nathalia Primary School, and the Dhurringile Prison to continue community learning of Yorta Yorta language.