

# Story writing in remote locations (SWIRL)

Lawry Mahon



SWIRL, a literacy reengagement program, has been running in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory for the past 13 years. SWIRL involves Victoria University staff and students working in remote communities and schools to conduct a range of activities such as story telling, games and sport, bush tucker, hunting and gathering, that lead to story writing with children.

Armed with digital cameras, Victoria University students and community children determine activities, plan and implement them. A great example of one such activity was a day out gathering Maku (witchety grubs) in a community some 300 kms west of Alice Springs. We spent the day with the children under the watchful eyes of the senior women, searching and digging, discovering how to identify the likely locations for a 'find', and filling small containers with our 'catch'. After a successful catch, the women then showed us how to cook the little delicacies, and we all had a taste.

The photos and video clips from the afternoon's activities were then organised into a PowerPoint display. Text was added with the assistance of the

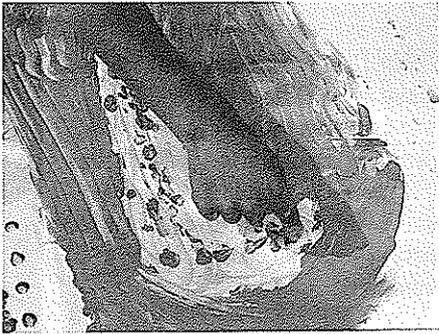
participant children, and Pitjantjara words were added with the help of one of the senior women. She also recorded her voice onto the PowerPoint presentation in

her own language. The product was then printed up in colour, laminated, and bound, and a copy was given to each person who assisted in its production. As this was all done using PowerPoint, and includes recorded voices, it is also a 'talking book', which assists the children maintain and enhance their traditional activities, cultures and languages.

The focus of SWIRL is reengaging literacy learning in young children. There are no overt spelling, grammar or punctuation lessons, but children are given the opportunity to see their own faces, activities and lives represented on paper for them to use to learn to be literate, and the text is based around words the children already know how to use.

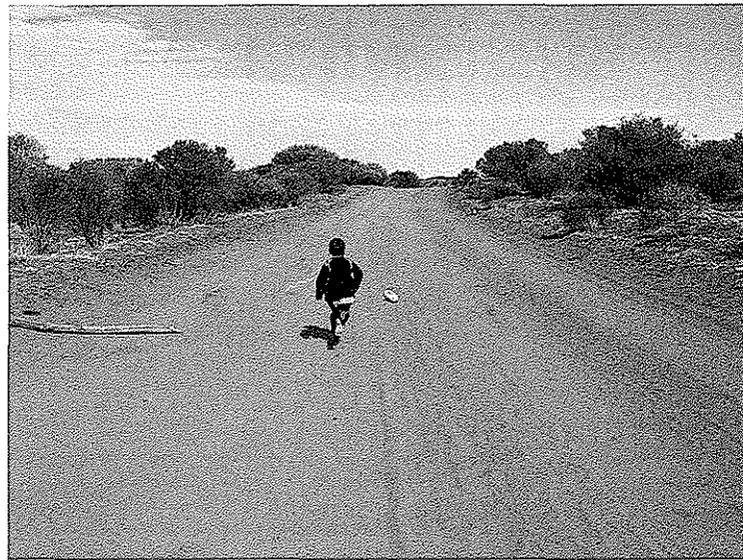
SWIRL began as a small informal relationship between Victoria University staff and students and remote communities with a focus on educational support. It quickly developed to a standard component of teacher education at Victoria University to complement and extend the university's commitment to inclusion of Indigenous education in teacher education.

A very strong focus of the literacy work of SWIRL is the children producing picture books in both their Indigenous language, which is often



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their first language, and in English. There is a strong focus on the realisation that children need to feel included in the world of literacy, and if they only see perfect white faces, white lives and white stories, they will not feel a strong sense of self worth. Showing the children how to construct their own stories and



honouring those stories which also include their own faces and lives changes their view of the importance of literacy. This is also true of just about every classroom in the country – children from a multitude of backgrounds and cultures are often exposed to only a small selection of mainstream examples of day to day life in the literature that is available. The processes used through SWIRL, when used in a mainstream classroom, will offer the opportunity to include every child, from every cultural background, while still aiming to achieve a high level of literacy accomplishment. In a very real sense, each child can determine his or her own curriculum, where the teacher becomes a valuable supportive colleague, to assist each child attain the identified literacy goals. And when their own literary constructions are held in high esteem by the teacher and their peers, the children themselves feel included and respected. Copies of SWIRL books remain in both school and home and many are also available digitally for further reference and reading throughout their communities. SWIRL participants and children in communities have had open days, where parents have been invited to come and look at the outcomes of the program, and are encouraged to read the children's productions. This is often done via a barbeque afternoon, and attendance is always good.

Parents and young adults are also shown how to construct books about their own worlds, and often join the younger children through the SWIRL program. In mainstream schools, there would be many similar opportunities for parents to become co-authors with their children, with stories about family holidays, new babies, neighbours, and day to day life, that will assist children see the power of literacy and some of the things it has to offer them.

SWIRL has enjoyed strong and continuing support from the Northern Territory government

and Department of Employment, Education, and Training, and has attracted a research grant from the Federal Government, to understand its effects on participants, and to expand to other States.

The strong philosophical stance taken by SWIRL is to give real control of the learning to

the learner. The new technologies which include digital cameras assist that understanding becoming a reality. Other approaches are currently being trialled. One of these is to give children in remote communities a digital camera with the instruction to take 10 photographs of five things around their school, community, or home, that they really like, and five things that they would like to see changed. When these ten pictures are constructed into a book the literacy curriculum is suddenly and effectively individualised. Each item can then be worked through – thank you letters to anyone responsible for the items, through to plans, requests, fundraising, meetings, etc with anyone who has responsibility for the 'please change' items.

The SWIRL project enables children graphically the power of literacy in action. It is authentic rather than merely realistic game playing. Children are in control of their learning through social inclusion and community action. And it works in remote communities.

Professor Art Pearl from the University of Washington states:

**Literacy is not important.  
What you *do* with it is important.**  
(CONVERSATION, AUGUST 2008).

Lawry Mahon is a researcher and lecturer in Education at Victoria University, and has specialized in the areas of literacy engagement and enhancement, through the use of emerging technologies. He also has a strong interest in Indigenous issues from a social justice perspective. He instigated the Story Writing In Remote Locations (SWIRL) program during a visit to a remote Aboriginal community in 1996, and, with colleagues, continues to develop its framework.  
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