In a good deal of the rhetoric about youth practice that targets Indigenous young people, much is made about the importance of dialogue, particularly between “community” and those designing services. Unlike most academic papers, the structure of this paper reflects this conversational exchange. Like any dialogue, it has a history. This is not a new conversation. There are long traditions in this country of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people having these kinds of discussions.

Our conversation will revolve around some of the questions that have confronted us while doing various things with Indigenous communities. Before we go on it is important to say:


“Hello to our friends both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We write this while sitting in Nyungar country. We believe it is also worth remembering that Nyungar have contributed much to cultural and economic life in the south-west and that Nyungar knowledge and systems have had and continue to have much influence in this part of the world, particularly in relation to taking care of our young people.”
Some may find the style of the paper unconventional. However, we will follow the structure of a dialogue in the way we present. It is important to do this for a number of reasons. The first is that too often the voices of Indigenous experts are lost as a consequence of Western writing conventions that favour monologue (see Trudgen 2000). Second, we seek to model what in part we argue is missing in much youth practice: an exchange of ideas and knowledge.

This of course is not to imply that these accounts are simply opinions that hang on personal preference or whimsical claims. The account also draws on empirical material, both the work of others and our own research experience as ethnographers and youth practitioners (Attwood et al. 1994, p.198).

A conversation about youth work with Indigenous young people

LEN: In his now well-quoted speech to the Redfern Koori community in 1992, ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating (1992, p.353) said in relation to dealing with the injustices handed out to Indigenous Australians, “I think what we need to do is to open up our hearts a bit”. Nowhere is this more important in my view than when we are thinking about the future of young people.

However, Dave, some would question your right to talk about things to do with Indigenous young people. What would you say to those who might ask: what are you, as a non-Indigenous Australian, doing talking about the future of Indigenous young people?

DAVE: I think you are right to call me to account.

I still find Professor Marcia Langton (1993), one of the country’s most senior Indigenous academics, very helpful here. She says that we can make sense of Indigenous Australian culture and life by thinking about three broad domains or spaces where Indigenous experience is negotiated. I think her ideas are relevant to the topic of youth work.

She describes the first domain as those cultural spaces where Indigenous people interact with other Indigenous people, negotiating largely within Indigenous-controlled spaces and places.

In other words, this is where Indigenous people get to have social interactions, discussions and debates, and work out how to deal with their young people. The second domain is where non-Indigenous people, with little direct contact with Indigenous people, stereotype, iconise and mythologise Indigenous people, and of course “work out” how they think Indigenous young people should be dealt with. This involves people relying heavily on popular myths about Indigenous young people rather than actually spending time with Indigenous people. At times it involves a great deal of what Rob Watts (Bessant et al. 2006) calls social ventriloquism, or pretending that our talk about Indigenous young people is coming from them. I suspect that this is the domain where a great deal of youth work chatter goes on. The third domain is where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people actually come together and have direct dialogue. In this domain non-Indigenous and Indigenous people work together to improve the circumstances of young people. She claims that it is in this third space that we can find satisfactory ways of comprehending and interacting with each other. I think this is also a space where good youth work can get done too.

LEN: Yes Dave, I find this helpful too. I often think that we too easily accept the idea that the lives of Indigenous young people can only be dealt with by Indigenous communities. Langton reminds us that their experiences are influenced in a range of places. Some of this work goes on between Indigenous people, some goes on between non-Indigenous people and some involves both groups.

If we accept what Langton is saying then the first domain is pretty well the place for Indigenous families to control. She, along with many others, like some of my colleagues at Curtin University’s Indigenous Research Centre, would say that Indigenous people have every right to create spaces so they can get on and talk, plan and take action in relation to their young people without outside interference (Oxenham et al. 1999).

DAVE: So are you saying that there is no place for non-Indigenous youth workers in this first domain?
LEN: That’s one way of putting it. At the very least, I think Langton is suggesting that youth workers and youth organisations need to recognise that Indigenous people need physical, intellectual and cultural spaces where they can feel safe to talk about their kids’ futures. Rather than feeling precious and negative because you think we are excluding you, we need youth workers to encourage us to have time away on our own building communities, economies and supporting our young people (for examples see Arch et al. 2000).

Indigenous people, be they Murri, Koori, Nunga, Yamatji or others, need to be able to find places to do this without being steamrolled or bullied. I think this idea is fairly well represented when Nyungar remind us that: “Nidja Nyungar boodjar noonook nyinniny”. “This is Nyungar country you are sitting in”, not only in terms of land and ownership, but also in terms of family life and the management of our young people. In my view, youth workers would do well to recognise this as one very important guiding principle. At the very least youth workers ought to respect Indigenous cultural and political space and be cautious about invading Indigenous family life (see http://www.wrc.wa.gov.au/srt/publications/landscape/resource/nyungar.html).

DAVE: Can you give us an example?

LEN: Well there are hundreds really. Probably most of the good “youth work” gets done by Indigenous aunties, uncles, grandparents and other community members. I could list many Nyungar elders of mine like Aunty Kathy Yarren, Aunty Beryl Harp, Aunty Janet Collard and my Pop Bennell. These people shared out a lot of youth work among themselves, caring for hundreds of young people without any Wedjela interference. They would meet from time to time and make decisions about where to send young people, how to organise our schooling and work and what to do about us when we got into a bit of strife (see Kickett 1995).

However, the trouble is that by and large this is poorly resourced.

DAVE: Yes, I hear many stories of Indigenous “unofficial” youth workers taking young people out all over the country with not much more than a couple of swags, a feed, a billy and half a tank of fuel (see Binge 2004).

Recently I’ve seen some brilliant work being carried out by elders and other Indigenous leaders who are taking young people “back to country”, walking along together and reacquainting them with some of the old stories and conventions. This work involves young people getting away from unhealthy circumstances and moving into distinctly Indigenous cultural domains for periods of time. For those who are keen to read about this, Blundell and Woolagoodja (2005) describe work going on in the North Kimberley where senior custodians are taking young people into their traditional homelands and “freshening up” young people by “freshening up” the old paintings of the sacred creation spirits called Wanjina.

A similar thing is happening a little further south with the Yiriman Project who are arranging trips to country for young people from Karajarri, Mangala, Nyikina and Walmajarri communities. These trips involve senior people leading young people on a process of following in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents and ancestors (Yiriman Project 2002).

LEN: The important point to remember is that a lot of good work gets done when Indigenous families are left to do things themselves. If they have any role at all here then non-Indigenous people could be helping to get more resources for people to do this work.

DAVE: But Len, would you agree that this is not the only place where things occur which influence the lives of Indigenous young people? Many decisions are taken and much talk about Indigenous young people goes on quite separate from Indigenous communities.

LEN: Yes Dave, indeed most of those recently talking about the situation of young people in remote communities are both geographically and culturally very distant from those they are talking about. Not only are Indigenous young people being spoken about in their absence but the kind of things being said are often reliant on old colonial tropes, clichés and prescrip-

In my view, non-Indigenous youth workers have a role to play in work that is critical of these popular ideas about Indigenous young people. Can I even suggest that they ought to take a lead in this? Indigenous communities are under increasing pressure to deal with other things, such as struggles over native title, educating their young, breaking into local and regional markets and keeping remote communities viable (see Smith 1980; Saggers 2003).

DAVE: What about Langton’s third domain where people come together in dialogue, in conversation with each other, in a kind of exchange that is active for both?

LEN: Yes, this is where we are confronted with the greatest challenge. Not only is it difficult because of language and cultural differences, but also because of the history of forced separation from each other and the mistrust that people hold. However, it is important to work on what Nyungat call “gnulla koorling”, or “going along together”.

DAVE: How do we move on this challenge? How do we gnulla koorling?

LEN: As I said, there are no easy answers here. However, we actually have more examples in our history of people working together than we often think to be the case.

DAVE: Yes, you are right, there are no shortage of stories that involved “settlers” relying heavily on the leadership and direction of Nyungar young people who acted as guides, cultural attachés, workers, navigators, linguistic experts and political negotiators (see Palmer & Collard 1998; Van den Berg 1994; Winmar in Collard, Harben & Van den Berg 2004; Haebich 1988).

I can think of a string of youth programs that have been successful because people have spent a great deal of time together literally and symbolically walking along a shared path.

LEN: Can you mention some of these?

DAVE: One example comes to mind immediately. Some years ago the Catholic Education Office in Perth took seriously calls by Nyungar to get relevant educational resources into schools. They started by asking Nyungar to tell them in Nyungar about the key conceptual ideas that shape such an undertaking. What got produced was a package of material called *Nidja Nyungar Boodjar Noonok Nyinniny*. One of the principle features of this work was the use of three languages, Nyungar, Standard Australian English and Nyungar English. Today the kit is being used successfully all over the country (Catholic Education Office 2000).

LEN: Yes, we are badly mistaken if we think that it is something new to talk about whitefellas going along together with Indigenous people. I know members of my family have influenced the lives of many Wedjela. My grandparents, uncles, aunties and parents have a long-standing history of working in the pastoral industry, as health care workers, in a range of community organisations and advising and assisting many government departments and programs. There is a long and extended history of Nyungar women bringing up and educating white kids, particularly during my mother and grandmother’s time. As Henry Reynolds (1990, p.1) reminds us in *With the white people*, in this country “collaboration was as common as confrontation” and many Indigenous people have been “in a very real sense Australia’s black pioneers” (also see Green 1981; Grey 1841; Moore 1884). Miller (1995) reminds us that some of Europe’s most significant intellectual ideas are exports from Indigenous Australia.

Dave, what about you? How can we gnulla koorliny or go along together?

DAVE: I recently read about the work of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council (Woods et al. 2000, pp.91-99) and how they use an approach they describe as the malparara way of working.

In the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara context “malpa” means “friend”, and “malparara” means “a person going along with a friend or companion”. Malparara is
used to describe the process of two people, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous worker, working together, directly along side of each other to help improve things for young people.

In this approach, Indigenous workers are “chosen” because of their expertise, seniority, knowledge of local language, relationship to local kids and skills in relation to the local Indigenous cultural domain. These are workers who know the country, know the families, understand local politics, and are exceedingly qualified in terms of Indigenous law and culture. The non-Indigenous partner is recruited because they have specific professional skills. They often have formal training in one area of Western knowledge, such as nutrition, physiotherapy, anthropology, teaching, youth work or policy. These people are competent at writing, dealing with funding, have knowledge of other “mainstream” services and the culture of youth policy.

This style of youth work is premised upon the idea that the skills, knowledge and community affiliations of one person or from one cultural domain are inadequate for doing youth work and resolving youth problems in an Indigenous setting.

LEN: This sounds to me a lot like how things work in Indigenous cultural domains. In my experience, a job taken on in a community setting would normally involve at least a couple of Indigenous people coming together to work on things. This happens partly because it is more efficient and there is often a need to negotiate across at least two different cultural or familial domains. Nyungar could describe this as “gnulluk dabakarn koorliny” – “two going along slowly together”.

DAVE: This reminds me a little of the way Warlpiri from Central Australia go about the process of producing and managing community television in places like Yuendumu (Michaels 1989).

As I understand it, the Warlpiri have a system that makes it necessary to have two people (one from the Kirda and the other from Kurdungurlu group) working together when they are involved in cultural production, such as the making of a television documentary. In practice this might mean that one person (for example from the Kirda group) is responsible for carrying out the performance or production of a ritual event. The other (Kurdungurlu person) is responsible for managing, witnessing and regulating the quality of the performance. One looks like they have a more public role while the other is in the background undertaking different, but equally crucial, roles and responsibilities. This is situational and invertible so that the roles may be reversed from setting to setting depending on the circumstances. What is important is that this system recognises that any one person cannot adequately carry out work at the same time as ensuring the quality of something (Michaels 1989).

LEN: Another example that comes to mind is the work of those involved in Aboriginal education in places like Yolngu country in north-east Arnhem Land.

DAVE: You mean the work that has been described as two-way schooling (see Harris 1990 and Irrluma 1988)?

LEN: Yes, this style of education in community schools in northern Australia goes back to at least the mid-1970s when Indigenous communities identified the need to re-evaluate what was going on in their schools. Community elders wanted their kids to move across cultural domains, experiencing education in both Western schooling and in traditional lore and custom, and be capable of code switching and crossing cultural zones.

Two-way schooling involves the separation of work into at least two educational and cultural domains, the Yolngu (Indigenous) and the Balanda (Western). This approach demands a commitment to seeing Yolngu custodians of knowledge working with Western-trained Balanda teachers selected for their educational skills in Western content (see the Garma website at http://www.garma.telstra.com/).

DAVE: So, put simply, Yolngu teach Yolngu content and Balanda teach Western content, often in different physical settings?

LEN: While this approach has had its critics, I think it has some application to youth work.
DAVE: So if we applied this approach to youth work, would it necessitate a cultural division of labour?

LEN: Perhaps sometimes it might. As Richard Trudgen (2000) points out, we are talking about work that happens across at least two language zones; if you can’t speak one then either learn it or accept that you need to get in those who speak it to help.

DAVE: This reminds me of a discussion we had not long after we had first met. I asked you what you considered to be the key to successful work with Indigenous young people and their communities. At the time I was a youth worker in a centre that attracted large numbers of young Nyungar. Do you remember what your response was?


DAVE: I remember being a little embarrassed and confused. I think I repeated my question asking again what I should keep in mind when trying to work with Indigenous communities. What did you do?

LEN: I think I just repeated myself and left it at that.

DAVE: Yeh, you bugger. It took me some time to figure out what you were getting at. What was your point?

LEN: Loosely translated I was saying: You non-Indigenous person, come and sit down. Watch and listen to Nyungar talk and speak in an informed way about working with our young people.

DAVE: Yes, for example the idea that Nyungar languages are either extinct or immaterial is very popular.

LEN: Yes, but not only language in a literal or minimalist sense. It is important that people see language also as a set of interpretive tools, knowledges and conceptual theories.

DAVE: In retrospect, I was so caught up in trying to create the definitive blueprint that it didn’t occur to me that learning language is not something of a luxury, something that is secondary to the process of doing youth work.

LEN: No I wouldn’t want to let people off the hook that easily. No-one ever completely “knows” the language of another. I guess what I am talking about is the importance of starting the process and asking others to help.

DAVE: Are there other principles that might help us think more clearly about youth work with Indigenous young people?
LEN: I can think of a couple, but what about you Dave? I don’t want to be the one offering all the answers, or driving all the principles.

DAVE: Yes, fair point. I think you have offered another principle; that non-Indigenous people also have an obligation to come up with some “answers”.

There are also sound practical and moral reasons why youth workers should take on some leadership in relation to Indigenous community affairs. I remember hearing Roberta Sykes (2000), a black academic from Queensland, talking about how Indigenous people are often called upon to take leadership in reconciliation, Aboriginal Affairs and also to perform an educational function for non-Indigenous people. She says that if we do our maths, then for every Indigenous person there are 18 to 20 non-Indigenous people. This is a hell of an unequal share of the workload if we expect Indigenous people to take along non-Indigenous Australians.

However, is there also a danger that youth workers can take on leadership insensitively?

LEN: Of course we need to be kunya wangkiny – sensitive to Indigenous and legislative protocols and obligations. But, at the same time, there is much to be done by those who want to move beyond simply blaming others. We mustn’t get too frightened or use the excuse that it is not our business. We have to kura, yeye, boorda, wangkiny koorliny gnulla koorlangka.

DAVE: Yes, we have to keep talking and going along together in our work to strengthen the lives of Indigenous young people for the past, the present and the future.

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New report on Aboriginal youth
The Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria have prepared a report titled VIYAC voices telling it like it is: Young Aboriginal Victorians on culture, identity and racism. It includes interviews with nine young Indigenous Victorians who offered their personal perspectives on culture, identity and racism – issues chosen for their impact on the lives of Indigenous Australians – and provides a summary of research and statistical data on young Indigenous Victorians. The authors note in their conclusion that a ‘serious investment’ is needed to improve outcomes for young Indigenous Victorians. The report’s recommendations are based on themes drawn from the report: identity, cultural expression and learning, racism and cultural awareness, support for families, and research with Indigenous young people. For copies, contact VIYAC, ph: (03) 9267 3788; email: viyac@viyac.org.au; or download the report from: http://www.yacvic.org.au

National conference
The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is holding a national conference from 19 to 21 September 2007 at the Adelaide Convention Centre for service providers, policymakers, researchers and others focused on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The conference will provide local, national and international perspectives on best practice in responding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ diversity and competing needs, and aims to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, policymakers, researchers, government representatives, other non-government organisations and various industry representatives together to make renewed commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. See: http://www.snaicc.asn.au/news/NationalConference2007.html

EXTRA