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Learning-to-Learn-With a Boon Wurrung Tree

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Abstract

This article explores the layered impact of partnership learning across museum, pre-service education and school contexts where the agency of trees provokes new insights for art education practices. It features collective experiences of a *Tree School* and *Tree Story* exhibition along with associated Art-Reach experiences between pre-service teachers (PSTs) and early primary school children. For us, the culturally-marked Boon Wurrung tree was a central inspiration for cross-institutional learning. It energised our understanding of Indigenous knowledges and provoked ways to re-imagine how we explore Indigenous perspectives through art education as entangled with Museum education.

Introduction and Approach to the Study

Through sharing descriptive accounts, reflections, photographs and artwork, we outline how we learnt to learn together as art/research/teaching/educators (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019) within museum and university contexts. Our approach is one of *learning with* rather than *teaching about* as together we learnt to work *with* various institutions and protocols across pre-service education; school and museum contexts; *with* a culturally modified tree; *with* the Djirri Djirri dancers; *with* Indigenous ways of knowing; *with* making and responding to artworks; and *with* a generative forest of ideas concept and investigation. The article shares descriptive and responsive insights from the authors through our various roles as Academics in the Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab at Monash; Arts Educators for Pre-service Education; Museum Director and Co-curator of Tree Story; and the Museum Education/Audience Development Leader. In turn, we share how our arts-based learning across our multiple sites and units of learning helped us build a/effective ways to include Indigenous knowledges (Bonini, 2021; Briggs, 2021; Martin & Andrew, 2021) and more-than-human subjectivities (Martin, in MUMA Monash, 2021a) and sensibilities in art education contexts. Through shared dialogue and reflective conversations, we look back on our learning that recognises shifts and conceives of future strategies to *learn-to-learn* and *unlearn* taken-for-granted practices, as we forge partnership learning (Burke, 2020) through *cross boundary work* (Seligmann, 2014) between our Faculty of Education and the Monash University's Museum of Art.

Our paper is contextualised within two Art-Reach experiences that occur in a *Creative Connections: Visual Art unit* in association with Monash University Museum of Art. To explore how we, the authors, have learnt to learn, we employ participatory arts-based research (Leavy, 2018; Nunn, 2020) where art-making/responding and shared teaching and learning experiences are described and reflected upon by the authors as we continue to learn-to-learn with the data. We look to Bickel, Springgay, Beer, Irwin, Grandeur and Xiong (2011) for their notion of radical relatedness as we work together across our institutions to witness, listen to and reflect on our learning. In this conception, we also call on the a/r/tographic renderings (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019) as “theoretical spaces through which to explore artistic ways of knowing and being research” (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005, p. 889). We employ *living inquiry* to contextualise the embodied experiences of the Art Reach events and employ a/r/tographic renderings for poetic and future-orientated insights. Namely, we ask, what *openings* have been made possible as a consequence of this experience; what is now seen and revealed that may not have been so obvious before? What *reverberations* are there that echo into our future learning? And we consider the *excess* of the experience in terms of provoking new understanding of art/education/museums intersections. Through Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005), we explore ‘excess’ as the space where the knowledge gained from the experience allows us to continuously “un/ravel, un/write, and re-imagine” (p. 908) in order to provoke new and deeper understandings of art/education/museums intersections.

Tree School as Inspiration

When MUMA bought the International arts initiative, *Tree School*, to Melbourne, a striking learning experience formed around it. *Tree school* became the catalyst for a new community partnership between Monash University Museum of Art, the Art and Design Faculty and the Faculty of Education. This partnership enabled a series of immersive arts experiences that saw Monash PSTs and local primary school students engage together with a Boon Wurrung marked tree, now in the custodianship of the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash, dance with the Djirri Djirri dancers and explore Indigenous perspectives. The marked tree prompted further learning when PSTs built on these experiences by running a *Forest of Ideas* Art-Reach for the primary school children at the Monash Peninsula art studio in the Faculty of Education.

Throughout these creative experiences, we became collective learners together. Rather than coming in with pre-formed concepts, we asked: How could we ‘learn-to-learn’ with a marked tree? How can engagement through looking, touching, moving with, listening and learning from the Boon Wurrung tree reveal knowledge? What happens to learning when we consider the intentions of the ancestor who left evidence of cultural practice and presence upon the marked tree as articulated by Elder N’arweet Dr Carolyn Briggs AM. What happens when we open ourselves to the marked tree working on us? What stories can we share through being

with the marked tree and other trees in our lives? And, how can we creatively engage with and learn from the trees in our community in ways that are sustainable and respectful within our classrooms and locales? In the process, we imagined how our ‘learning-to-learn-with-’ approach could be applied by teachers in their classrooms.

As our writing progresses, we, as author/educator/participants reflect on and share insights from our collective narratives.

Narrative Reflection 1

Learning together along the way, we could step in and be a voice within a community of educators who facilitated the learning across our institutions. Our exchange across educational roles was particularly supportive for teaching into a COVID-affected international online world while simultaneously facilitating the face-to-face Art-Reach. We put in the time to ensure a strong foundation for educational authenticity which created conditions for spontaneity when we worked together. For instance, we changed modes with ease and proficiency while working across age groups and levels of knowledge, locally and Internationally; a collective of learners listening and responding together, enjoying the collaborative process.

Communal Learning Through Tree School

Tree School was part of a larger initiative called *Tree Story*, an exhibition that brought creative practices from around the world to create a ‘forest of ideas’ that relate to the environment and issues of sustainability. It was a big idea, an immersive event that was designed to connect people with each other and trees. *Tree School* was first brought to life by artists and architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. It has had a number of iterations including in San Paolo, Abu Dhabi, Palestine and Hong Kong. Each version of *Tree School* responds to the place where it is held. In Melbourne, *Tree School* was conceived as a place of knowledge sharing with a strong Indigenous and environmental focus. At its heart was an ancient Boon Wurrung Tree.

As stated on MUMA’s *Tree School* website, for the founders, Hilal and Petti:

The Tree School is a place where people gather for communal learning and producing knowledge that is grounded in lived experience and connected to communities. The tree, a living being with its own characteristics and history, creates a physical and metaphorical common where ideas and actions can emerge through critical, free and independent discussion. The Tree School

reclaims a different way of learning, one that cuts across conventional disciplines of knowledge and welcomes marginalised forms. By activating a critical and egalitarian learning environment, The Tree School operates according to the interaction and interests of the participants. It is consequently in constant transformation, and can last days, weeks, months, even years. (Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti in Nadotti & Axel, 2018, p. 307)

At MUMA *Tree School* was coordinated by Yorta Yorta and Wurundjeri artist-educator-PhD candidate Moorina, and the *Tree School* curriculum in Melbourne was developed in dialogue with Elder N’arweet Dr Carolyn Briggs AM and Dr Brian Martin, artist and Associate Dean Indigenous, MADA and director of the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab, the artists Hilal and Petti, and colleagues from the Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Monash Science, Monash Art Design & Architecture and the Monash Faculty of Education we learnt-to-learn from the tree itself and related protocols from the cultural knowledge holders.

MUMA’s iteration of Tree School reached out to schools and surrounding communities while forming a new engagement with Monash Peninsula campus, enabling the Faculty of Education to create a series of Art-Reach experiences. This created the opportunity to share stories and knowledge together across age groups and experiences as a “community of learners engaged in artistic, creative inquiry” (p. 2) who together are learning to learn by “becoming pedagogical” (Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, & Gordon, 2013, p. 20). Primary students, pre-service, beginning and lead teachers, lecturing staff, knowledge holders and the lead artists all learnt ‘under a tree’ to share stories, knowledges and determine actions that could support positive change and sustainability while contributing to our cross-community well-being. At the same time, we sought meaningful social connection between us, especially given the anxiety and uncertainty around issues such as recent bushfires in our region (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020), as well as increasing social isolation (exacerbated by the Covid pandemic). Topics for our Art-Reach experiences included trees as ancestors, why the world needs to plant more trees, what we can learn from trees and forests, our favourite trees, and most importantly how we can best live together as a community and study, work and make in the most sustainable ways.

Learning with Tree School Knowledge Holders



Figure 1. Views of the Boon Wurrung tree on Country, at Tree School, MUMA and Up Close

Note. The culturally marked Boon Wurrung tree was found in a paddock and saved from being burnt and cleared (Photo: Keryn Nossal); Exploring the Boon Wurrung tree at Tree School (Photo: Rodney Decker); Participants carefully touched the shape of the marking and wondered what was made from it all those years ago. The children smelt, felt, and examined the patterns and rhythms of the tree's ancient form (Photos: Geraldine Burke).

When Elder N’arweet Dr Carolyn Briggs AM, invited us to participate in Tree School at MUMA, she led a “Welcome to Country” ceremony (11 March, 2021). The Boon Wurrung tree lay in the gallery’s centre, revealing hundreds of years of weathered patterning and connections to cultural practices, sustainable utilisation of natural resources and ancestry. This magnificent tree witnessed and sustained life. N’arweet asked us to notice these residue marks and wonder about their being the memory of a carved shield and coolamon. She noted the depth of material and technological knowledge evident in the way the tree was marked, without harming the tree. She spoke of the tree as “more than an object ... a living entity and witness”. Recognising ‘Country’ as an important resource for all but one that needs to be less transactional and more nurturing and sustainable. To that end, she invited us to engage with intention and purpose while simultaneously doing no harm to Country and no harm to Bundjil’s children. N’arweet writes in *Tree Story*:

Welcome to Country is what we call Tanderrum and it is an invitation—a conditional invitation to Country, and the condition is that you come with purpose. So, identify what your purpose is. What is the reason for your coming? (Briggs, 2021, p. 3)

She says that Bunjil, the creator, “teaches us that we are responsible for this great beautiful country that he has created” and that Indigenous people have this “circular relationship” that means “we also have to protect this Country from people that are not responsible for it. We have to ask all visitors to keep two promises while they are on Country” (p. 3). She says “The first promise is really simple--don’t harm the land, don’t harm the children of Bundjil. The second promise is to honour and respect the laws of Bundjil” through various pillars (Briggs, 2021, pp. 3- 5).

For N’arweet (Briggs, 2021, pp. 4-5) these pillars include:

- Yulendj; thinking about knowledge “in a community sense, so community not just being the people around today, but also the people who were here two thousand years ago, five thousand years ago and the people who will be here in five thousand years’ time. That is also a community, it’s an intergenerational community.” (p. 4)
- Maintaining connection to stories through “(e)nsuring that the stories that need to be passed down are passed down, and those stories remain consistent for thousands, and thousands and thousands of years.” (p. 4)
- Djeembana; valuing community and diversity, through the pillar of djeembana, a place for gathering. This involves seeing “the things that we have in common. What

is it that brings us together? What is the thing that we are trying to achieve? We call this pillar djeembana.” (p. 5)

- Parbin-ata; valuing Country not just as “physical space” but to see Country as “...all the things that have occurred for thousands of generations in that country, and all the things that will occur into the future—what’s happened on Country. ... And if we can build that connection, then we harness that responsibility for Country, and we protect that Country.” (p. 5)

Meanwhile, Martin, speaks about the tree as an "ancestor in front of us" and the palpable "presence" you can feel through the tree's "living agency" (Tree School Opening, 11 March, 2021). From there Bonini shares details of the *Tree School* Curriculum she has designed in consultation with the Tree School founders, N’arweet, Martin and other colleagues from various Monash University faculties. The Tree’s story of being fortuitously rescued from a land clearing burn-off, and being cared for by Indigenous knowledge holders is an important part of our learning, as seen in the video installation featured as part of the greater Tree Story exhibition, 'Boon Wurrung Tree' (MUMA, Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab and Fancy Films, 2021a). In this same video, Professor Jacinta Elston, Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at Monash University, states that "whilst these trees are often called scar trees, in fact, it wasn't a deficit, it wasn't a negative about it. It's an acknowledgement of the fact that the tree has healed." Consequently, as authors we refer to the tree as a marked tree; the scarring left a mark but did not destroy the tree; instead, the tree lived with the marking and was able to sustain life - the practice of making coolamons, shields and canoes was a sustainable practice.

Art-Reach @ Monash University Museum of Art: Learning with Knowledge Holders

Much planning went into the “deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful... decisions and actions” that informed our intentional teaching approach (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2019, p. 17) and the way the Tree School Art-Reach was structured by MUMA and Monash lecturers in conjunction with Bonini and the *Tree School* founders. Although we, the authors, curated events in the Art-Reach excursion, our intentional teaching encouraged student-centred and open-ended expression that responded to the marked tree as a point of inspiration. The planning process was shared with the PSTs who facilitated the Art-Reach with the children while also responding to and curating components of the learning experience, and then curated their own Forest of Ideas Art-Reach thereafter. In preparation for the Art-Reach experience, the PSTs learnt to learn with a range of curriculum approaches that pushed them beyond the boundaries of mainstream school curriculum. They learnt about the *Tree School* curriculum process with special regard for protocols modelled between the Indigenous knowledge holders and participating educators. For

instance, originally, we were thinking of tracing the marks in the tree to create templates for the children to use on their large murals of the Tree. In consultation with Bonini and Martin, we instead encouraged the children to carefully touch and observe the man-made and ageing marks of the tree – as a much deeper form of engagement. The children’s learning became visceral as they engaged with the marks and wondered what they could reference. The template would not have afforded this depth of connection.

Our Art-Reach experiences were also influenced by the broader Tree School curriculum, which was performed in yarning circles and self-guided conversations run for community groups. It was shaped by the input of Indigenous knowledge holders as well as “a group of Monash educators who share an urgency to decolonise, unlearn and relearn. Accompanied by the voice of N’arweet questions [were] drawn from the conversations of the *Tree School* working group and considered issues of sustainability, decolonising, disruption and learning” (Bonini, 2021, p. 1). For instance, participants sat with the marked tree and asked:

- How do you position yourself to the Boon Wurrung Tree? How do you practice sustainability?
- How do you decolonise your mind, body and work?
- How do you acknowledge and engage with the Traditional Owners of the Country in which you live and work?
- How do you care for Country? (Bonini, Tree School Curriculum program, 2021, p. 2).

**Art-Reach @ Monash Faculty of Education:
Learning-to-Learn by Making Links**

Our multi-visit partnership learning with MUMA held the intention of deep respect for the culturally marked Boon Wurrung tree and its capacity to nurture growth, understanding and knowledge. Respect was nurtured in the context, conditions, activities and ongoing actions to amplify whatever learning might occur.

Narrative Reflection 2

In just one example of amplification, MUMA enabled the “pre-service teachers as a key player in the development of museum educational practices” (Seligman, 2014, p. 51) for the Art-Reach experience. As Seligman states, “Departing from the “them and us” mentality and further developing a more equitable dynamic between museums and pre-service teachers can help to break down critical barriers that have traditionally held many teachers from integrating museums into their teaching (51-52). The experience at MUMA helped the PSTs develop’ academic and pedagogical skills while taking part in contemporary innovative learning opportunities that could translate into further teaching possibilities for the PSTs. In turn, the Faculty Studio was able to speak back to the experience at MUMA when extending the learning into the Forest of Ideas Art-Reach which, as the name suggests, holds the capacity to continuously branch and grow.

Our tiered approach led us to explore a range of curricula, frameworks and pedagogical strategies to link mainstream curricula alongside Aboriginal pedagogies such as the 8 Ways curriculum, introduced by the MUMA educators, which helped our collective plan and review the Art-Reach experiences. The 8 Ways pedagogical framework helps teachers think beyond content to teach through Aboriginal processes: learning through storytelling; planning and visualising processes; working non-verbally with self-reflective, hands-on methods; learning through images, symbols and metaphors; learning through place-responsive, environmental practice; using interdisciplinary approaches; modelling and scaffolding by working from wholes to parts; and connecting learning to local values, needs and knowledge.

As well as learning-to-learn-with various aspects of the 8 ways curriculum, the PSTs learnt how the Tree School experience could work *with* various aspects of the prescribed Victorian Curriculum. Working together, all educators involved in the Art Reach experiences called on the Cross Curriculum Priorities (VCAA, n.d.-a) which revealed rich and practical ways to connect, link, layer and amplify learning in, with, through and beyond Tree School.

**Learning-to-Learn-With the Boon Wurrung Tree:
An Outline of our Arts-Based Approach**

The following section details our Art-Reach experience with Tree School learning: with the Boon Wurrung tree and Djirri Djirri dancers (Stacie Piper and Mikayla George); with artists through the Tree Story exhibition; and through a Forest of Ideas Art-Reach at Monash Peninsula Campus where trees provided material, cultural, conceptual and environmental prompts for art making.

Narrative Reflection 3

We thank and acknowledge the 8 ways team and Elders whose work has informed our learning. In being given permission to engage with this approach we were advised that “the 8 ways or Aboriginal Pedagogy, belongs to a place, not a person or organisation. It comes from ‘Country’ in Western New South Wales. Baakindji, Ngiyampaa, Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, Wiradjuri, Wangkumarra peoples and other nations own the knowledge’s this framework came down from (Allan Hall, 2021).

Tree School: Learning and Moving with the Boon Wurrung Tree and Cultural Knowledge



Figure 2. Moving With Cultural Dance and the Wurrung Scar Tree.

Note. The Djirri Djirri dancers, PSTs and children move through dance to connect to tree, animal and Country

Moving and Making with Djirri Djirri Dancers – Stacie Piper and Mikayla George Tree School and Tree Story

The Art-Reach involved a sequence of arts experiences where movement across arts forms enabled us to move beyond Western categorisations of non/human and nature/culture. For many of the participant children (from diverse backgrounds with about 50 percent born overseas and 70 percent of parents born overseas) meeting the Djirri Djirri dancers, Piper and George, and the Boon Wurrung Tree was their first direct experience of Indigenous Australia. We learnt to learn and teach with each other.

Dancing

To start, the Djirri Djirri dancers, Piper and George, taught us how to move with cultural knowledge. Their dances were created to honour Ancestors, Family and Country. Through gestures and movement, we were able to evoke the animals (eels, lyrebirds, kangaroos), land and water – moving across time and place. We embodied connections to ecological and cultural knowledge, listened to Wurundjeri music and learned Woiwurrung language. The PSTs' understanding of the dance elements came alive as Piper and George demonstrated how the animals and elements moved with layers of Country: using various parts of their bodies to become the long legs, neck and beak of the pecking emu. In the dance, we moved through different levels to represent the six levels of Country; such as crossing and changing directions of hand and arm movements to represent the gentle, undulating water from the river. The initial hesitation of the children was eased as the PSTs and teachers joined the children in the dance. We learnt through demonstration and circular groupings where we could each pick up movements at our own pace. The dancers also gave visible form to contemporary and personalised possum skin cloaks and discussed the importance of keeping this cultural practice strong. Like remembering and using Wolwurrung language, it's another important way to keep culture strong.

Narrative Reflection 4

An international student engaging with the class on Zoom showed the Djirri Djirri dancers how she was moving like an eel. Stacie Piper, the dancer, was thrilled that her cultural teaching was reaching international students live and in sync with the face-to-face students and was excited about sharing this with others. Photos of the Art Reach show joyous smiles on the children's and PSTs faces. We see the PSTs shift from student to teacher and researcher. All these are powerful reminders. **No matter our age, experience, or culture we can learn to learn with human/non-human**

Mural Making

Inspired by the way Piper and George embodied animal/Country/movement connections, we encouraged sensorial knowing (Malone & Moore, 2019) to explore the Boon Wurrung tree installation. Through intentional teaching, the PSTs encouraged students to move with the patterns and forms of the Tree as they observed and embodied the tree through bodily movement. The children gestured and became a growing tree, a tree in the wind as well as the shapes of the carved areas and the elegant outline of the Tree itself. In addition, participants re-read the picture book 'Welcome to Country' (Wandin Murphy, Kennedy, 2016). This well-known picture book is about Indigenous connections to Country (in our region of the Kulin Nations). This time, however, we revisited the picture book on the lookout

for marked trees; and the coolamons, shields and canoes made from culturally marked trees that are featured pictorially in the book but not spoken of in the text. The children then felt the shifting contours and textures of the Tree, imagining coolamons and shields as they ran their hands along the perimeter of the markings and developed non-verbal sense of connection with the tree. The *Tree School* setting encouraged the children to slow down, to be gentle with their investigations (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2016) and to pay attention to sensory engagement.

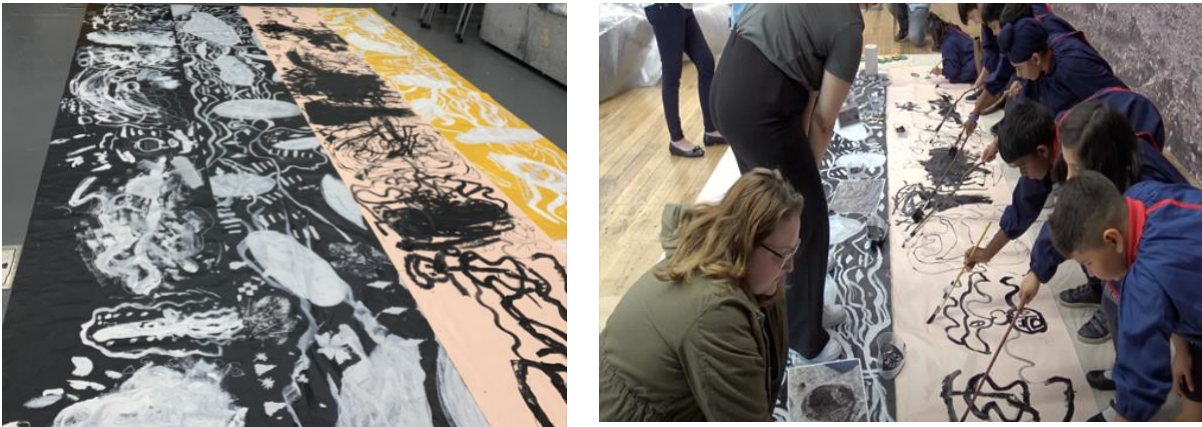


Figure 3. Children Create a Mural Inspired by the Boon Wurrung Culturally Marked Tree

Note. Year 1/2 children and Monash PSTs worked with the Boon Wurrung tree to creatively respond to its ancient rhythms, patterns and carved scars that suggest the making of a shield and coolamon.

The children's observations of the tree were drawn into the air to extend the gestural confidence gleaned from their dancing before they then used deliberately large brushes to draw their response to the Tree. Tree-handled brushes facilitated twisting and turning of brushes to create tapering, thick, thin and surprising lines. The PSTs guided the children towards material knowledge of the tree through sensorial and immersive investigation, while keeping in mind N'arweet's words to carefully respect the tree and all it stands for. They guided the children towards deep and detailed looking with magnifying glasses as they observed and discovered unique attributes of the Tree through caring and respectful touch. The children were curious and in wonderment of the Tree; they smelt the Tree and found living creatures within it.

The PSTs prompted the children to ‘see, think and wonder’ (Project Zero, 2019) about the Boon Wurrung Tree but always in relation to N’arweet’s prompts to connect to Indigenous knowledge while also respecting Country and children. Pictures of coolamons, shields and canoes were shared from the National Gallery of Victoria and the Bunjilaka Museum. Some students spoke of marked trees near their school, making links between ancient and contemporary cultural practices. These prompts helped the children to express their thoughts and the process of their knowing (Boyd & Cutcher, 2015) as they embraced the intergenerational relevance of the Tree’s and how the ancient act of making objects from the Tree lives on into the present.

Calling on Dinham & Chalk’s (2018) suggestion that “(p)urposeful dialogue is a critical, pedagogical strategy” that “teachers use to guide and promote learning” (p. 357) the PSTs used purposeful dialogue with the children to help them find language for the contours and textures how does this Tree feel? Rough, smooth, dry, muddy and so on. When the children translated their bold gestural air-drawn marked patterns, they produced viscous flows of ink with large strokes as well as finely detailed use of pens. Throughout, the PSTs facilitated and inquired into and were responsive to the children’s thinking.

The children’s close and curious attention helped them discover what was there to be found. Some discussed whether the Tree was feeling sad or was like an ancient legend; others noticed that the patterns of the tree were reminiscent of other patterns occurring in nature (like waves) and painted what creatures they wondered would make the Tree their habitat. Sometimes the children’s application of patterns and textures moved into stories about the creatures themselves, like the spiders they noticed, or how a girl could stand next to a tree and be friends. Some children added animals inspired by their dance with the Djirri Djirri dancers. In this way the tree/mural flowed into child-centred artmaking and helped the PSTs learn about the emergent nature of children’s artwork.

Narrative Reflection 5

Movement was an aesthetic learning thread linking across all the viewing/seeing/sensing forms. Not only but especially for the children making their first visit to an art gallery, moving in and between and in response to the tree/forms/art/works created a connected flow between seeing, responding, making and reflecting. The children were reverent in their listening and exploring. Whether touching or not touching, moving or not moving, they let their senses lead them into discovering connections through and within experience.

Tree Story: Learning with Artworks

Along with the Tree school experience, PSTs worked with the children to explore artworks from the Tree Story exhibition that featured “... creative practices from around the world to create a ‘forest’ of ideas relating to critical environmental and sustainability issues” (Day, 2021, p. 11). The following artworks were chosen as a means to develop skills in responding/making. Participants learnt about trees as cultural and emotional symbols as well as their part in sustaining life. The PSTs had been taught about Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Yenawine, 2013), but then had the opportunity to see Melissa Bedford (author) draw out rich answers from the children as she modelled this approach, before they too, worked with groups of children to explore the artworks.

Narrative Reflection 6

The Djirri Djirri dancers, Piper and George spoke about celebrating culture and bringing back art practices into present times. We discussed how cultural reclamation of creative practices is increasingly occurring and how we as educators can proactively include artwork in our teaching that supports the reclamation/proclamation of Indigenous knowledge.

Connecting to Indigenous Knowledges Through Trees

When Melissa Bedford, MUMA’s educator, modelled ways to respond to Martin’s countryscapes¹ (*Brian Martin, Methaxical Countryside: Boon Wurrung #1, 2021*), she undertook “(p)urposeful dialogue” as a “critical, pedagogical strategy (that) teachers use to guide and promote learning” (Dinham & Chalk, 2018, p. 357). In particular, she showed students how to take a walk ‘on Country’, by walking on top of and with Martin’s artwork (see Figure 4), which was installed on the floor of the gallery as an invitation to connect deeply to this place. She encouraged the children to think about how the artwork connected to the land underneath the foundations of the gallery; to register that this land has always been Boon Wurrung land. N’arweet herself modelled this special walking/responding practice and then invited the students to walk on Martin’s artwork and reflect on the experience. With great respect (especially as they had been told not to touch other artworks) the children walked slowly and calmly on the work and as they were embodying the countryside they were invited to collectively respond to three open-ended questions of the VTS strategy: *What’s going on in this artwork? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?* (Yenawine, 2013). Bedford paraphrased the children’s comments back to them and the conversation continued for about 15 minutes as they made discoveries about the works being

¹ See video explanation of this work by Dr. Brian Martin: <https://vimeo.com/527632283>

created with charcoal and paper (both from trees), and being constructed from several pieces of paper to form a grid-like structure. This provided a segue for the PSTs to use their jigsaw cut-outs of the countryside works so the children could play with the artist's composition.



Figure 4. Artworks explored through the Tree Story exhibition.

Note. Brian Martin, *Methexical Countryside Kamilaroi #10*, 2017, and *Methexical Countryside: Boonwurrung #1*, (installation view), 2021 (Photo: Christian Capurro); Embodied learning with Brian Martin's *Methexical Countryside: Boonwurrung #1*, 2021. (Photo: Geraldine Burke); Berdager and Péjus, *Arbres (Tree) series*, 2008. Installation view. (Photo: Christian Capurro); Reena Saini Kallat, *Siamese Trees (Man-yan)*, 2018-19, (Photo: Christian Capurro).

In the process, we all learnt about the power of art to connect, refresh and surprise. Even though Martin is working with complex philosophical ideas, the work connected with the children on a very fundamental level. Understanding a big term like ‘methaxical’ was made easiest when PSTs led children to notice the deep looking that Martin had undertaken to create such a detailed view of the ancestor trees. The experience showed us that very young children (5 and 6 years old) can have a focused conversation about complex ideas such as cultural connections through trees. The PSTs experienced and learnt how responding is an important part of the art repertoire and helps cultural awareness grow Vic Curriculum: Learning in the Visual Arts Learning (VCAA, n.d.-b); about belonging in a social space as collective activity; about the scaffolding of language in paraphrasing and extending the children’s words—all powerful ways to work with children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. “Observing the works of artists opens up children’s worlds to others who ‘talk the same language’ as them – a language of colours and shapes, movements and gestures, feelings and actions” (Dinham & Chalk, 2018, p. 46). The experience revealed how moving/walking/speaking/making with art could build collaborative and respectful awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait knowledge while responding to the Cross Curriculum priorities of the Vic Curriculum: Learning in the Visual Arts Learning.

Narrative Reflection 7

We were purpose driven, and our first point of call was to unlearn what we thought we knew. Instead, we learnt to learn with the force of the marked tree and to be guided by what it could offer our teaching. We stepped back from primarily deferring to the mainstream curriculum and worked with Indigenous knowledge holders who arched a philosophical approach over our learning. This foundational philosophy for learning informed by Elder N'arweet and the Tree School curriculum was central, purpose-driven and our first point of call.

Connecting to Emotion Through Trees

After exploring Berdaguer and Péjus’s artwork from the series *Arbres* (*Trees*, 2008), the PSTs undertook their own group sessions with the children. This followed Melissa’s modelling on how to build *responding* and *interpreting* skills. With the Tree portraits by Berdaguer and Péjus (see Figure 4), they encouraged the children to imagine what emotions were expressed in the sculptures, and how they would feel (e.g., sad, exuberant) if they too were one of these trees. Together the children and PSTs enacted the gestural and emotional affects of these sculptures. They moved as trunks, and branches while embodying learning about art and emotion and producing descriptive words and meanings. Extending on the ‘*See, Think, Wonder*’ routines of Project Zero (2019) the children were given paper and pencils to imagine and draw themselves as trees. Once again, the responding/making activity used movement as

a linking concept. The children called on their emotional register to link with visual representations of the psychological states portrayed by the trees. The trees were anthropomorphised by the PSTs and the children as a means to understand their emotional impact.

Connecting to Sustainability Through Trees

While looking at Reena Saini Kallat's *Siamese Trees* (Man-yan, Kallat, 2018-19; see Figure 4), the PSTs encouraged children to breathe deeply and feel their lungs as the air moved in and out of their bodies. At the same time, they showed the children pictures of what lungs look like inside the body and how they are related to the form of a tree with branches and leaves. It was not long before the children absorbed the correlation between Kallat's artwork and understanding trees as the lungs of the world. Sharing this fundamental understanding of reciprocal exchange—oxygen into carbon dioxide, carbon dioxide into oxygen—flowed into considering the trees as sustaining our environment and slowing down climate change. As the children grasped that trees are needed and that trees are our friends, they became art detectives exploring the act of making Siamese trees from woven electrical wire, metal, circuit boards and fittings; and in further layering, discussed upcycling materials for art. Although there was a politics of bifurcation between the trees and a shared historical past of nation states expressed through the use of wire, we did not explore this aspect of borderlands and partitions with students of this age. Instead, we looked at the formal qualities and the materiality of the work.

There is no doubt that the combination of the museum exhibition, dance, the Boon Wurrung tree, the school, the PSTs and the art materials and the participants' experiences coalesced to offer new ways for participants to think and feel about Indigenous knowledges and art.

Narrative Reflection 8

I feel a deeper understanding of Country. The Tree School experience has enabled me to see how the Indigenous way of knowing creates an ethical, meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the country. This reciprocity revealed itself across all the stakeholders and was evident in the strength of horizontal learning across our roles and institutional boundaries.

Learning with our Local 'Forest' of Ideas: An Art-Reach Inspired by Trees

Inspired by the 'forest of ideas' that *Tree Story* explored, we meet again at the Monash Peninsula studio to explore local tree stories through art. This provided an unexpected opportunity for our PSTs and University librarians to plan tree inspired activities for the

visiting children to build on their *Tree Story* and *Tree School* experiences. We employed art to reveal cultural/historical connections to trees; local and sustainable practices with/about trees; trees as animal habitat and biodiversity; pattern and design options with/about tree parts; and the symbolic, storytelling potential of trees. Figure 5 shows some of the children's artworks.

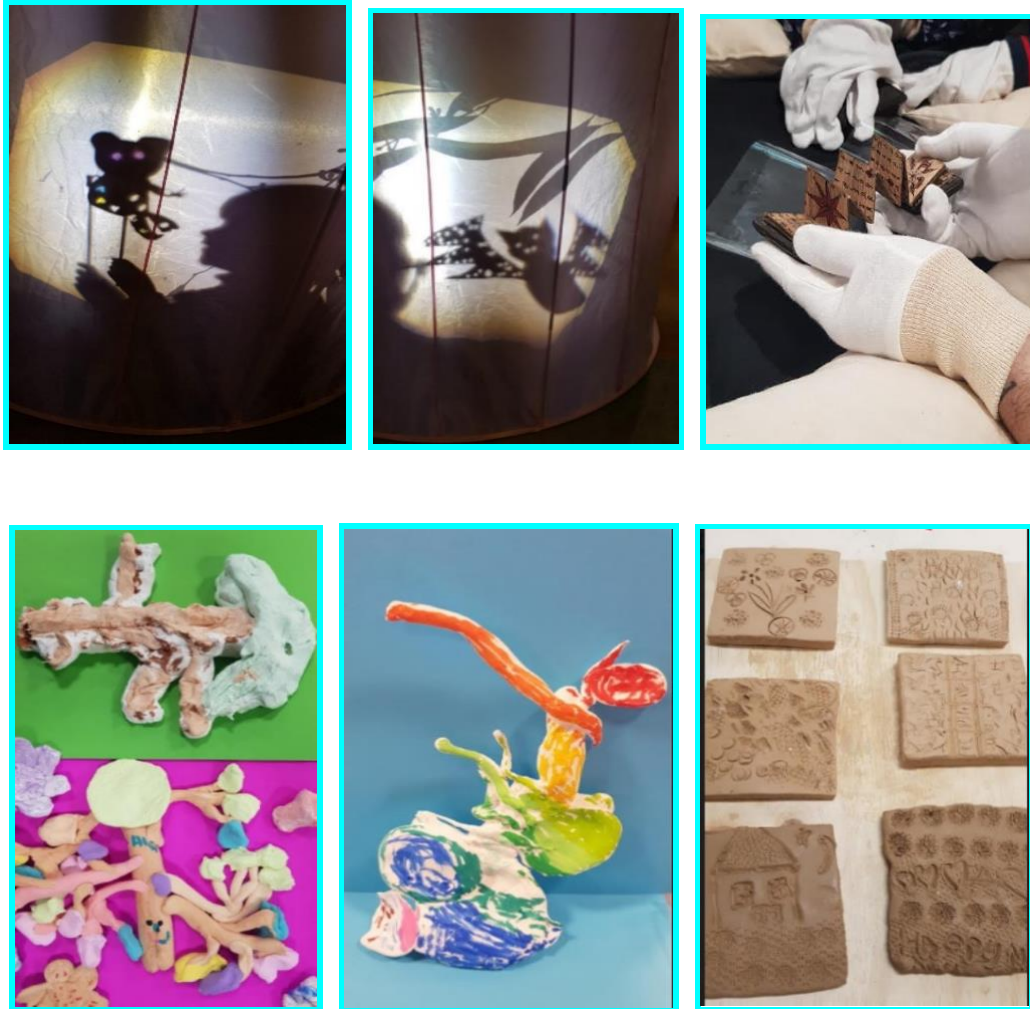


Figure 5. A selection of tree-inspired activities at Monash University's Art-Reach: Forest of Ideas

Note. Gum tree shadow puppets, embossed tree-part tiles, bark books and wooden artefacts, tree-inspired portraits and nature walk prints (Photos: Melissa Belford and Geraldine Burke)

How Did Trees Work on our Learning Through Art?

“It's about shifting our understanding about the non-human and non-human agency, and in particular an Indigenous view of the world that looks at Country as its own subjectivity. This idea is of land being an object and Country being a subject, a living subjectivity.” (Dr. Brian Martin in interview, MUMA, 2021b)

We have learnt from the knowledge holders that the Boon Wurrung tree enacts the learning on us; the tree is a force that is experienced and enacts change through our arts responses. MacRae, Hackett, Holmes, and Jones (2018) suggest this “shift from seeing the human subject as the sole locus of agency, recognises that meaning can emerge through mutually active relationships with the non-human; materials, places and objects” all of which “are understood as having agency” (p. 507). The tree enacted its learning on the children as they equated its rhythms to greater patterns of connection - ocean waves and patterns of wind and typography; seeing the marked tree, touching it and painting the tree’s contours and patterns prompted one group of children to think of it as a legend that keeps telling its story to us. The intergenerational importance of marked trees became tangible to us as we became aware of Indigenous practices of marking trees being continued today and within our region. The Tree enabled us to connect to knowledge across time and to build awareness and respect for Indigenous cultural practices, leading to relational learning with the Tree.

Narrative Reflection 9

The Boon Wurrung tree doesn't have an ego: it seems to call up ancestral knowing. “The tree felt magical – it was as if the children were entering another world.” The tree’s gift was learning – an abundance of possibilities. And the structures in place with respectful protocols and practices created significant freedoms. The tree connected with and through dance, art, stories, and Indigenous knowledge. The art responses provided pathways: the dancers embodied the animals and connections to Country; we embodied the tree through art; the dancers helped us move with rhythm and beat and clap sticks as we moved through ochre, ground, sky, wind and water. Cultural knowledge opened up to us as did self-driven investigations into what the Tree suggested. It was invigorating to know we were part of supporting the Djirri Djirri dancers; to value the effort made to save the marked Tree; to contribute to respecting Cultural practices. Being part of this palpable surge of Language, Culture and movement changed the way we look at trees forever. The force of the ancestral Boon Woorung tree is profound and active.

The inseparability of nature/culture/art/community was evident as we learnt with trees through art; and learnt with culture through trees; while making art with tree parts etc. After Lens Tagushi (2011), we felt the performative agency of the Boon Wurrung tree and the workings of the artefacts of our context as they intra-acted with us and upon our learning. We came to see ourselves “in a constant and mutual state of responsibility for what happens in the multiple intra-actions emerging in the event” as they affected us “in our mutual state of co-existence” (p. 48).

Respectful Ways to Learn with Indigenous Knowledge

Narrative Reflection 10

Being part of the Tree School project has deepened my capacity to appreciate the world from an Indigenous perspective. As a museum educator I witnessed how learning about Indigenous knowledges and culture promotes reconciliation; builds cultural confidence and encourages us all (teachers, students, gallery staff, children) to be culturally sensitive and respectful. This project has given all participants an opportunity to engage with the world's oldest living culture. We are fortunate to have a first-hand experience to learn from and engage with artists, artworks and cultural belonging that celebrates this culture.

As partners in learning, we, the authors, now reflect on our *Tree School* and Forest of Ideas learning in order to share insights for other educators in schools and museums who may wish to explore Indigenous knowledges through art in our region. Rather than writing a guide on how to teach about culturally significant/marked trees and the forest of ideas concept, we are aware that the conditions for *learning-to-learn-with-* are all important to the process when thinking through arts-based investigations that engage with Indigenous knowledge. We want to keep the questions posed by the Tree School Curriculum at the forefront of our thinking as we explore future projects together, by asking: (a) How can we decolonise, unlearn and relearn (through art), and (b) How can we explore sustainability, decolonising, disruption and learning (through art)? We, therefore, present our prompts for developing the conditions for learning-to-learn-with in Table 1.

Table 1*Developing conditions for learning-to-learn-with*

Respecting Indigenous Protocols
<p>When preparing for a project that incorporates Indigenous knowledges and art, we ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What Cultural Safety Training can we undertake in the first instance?</i> • <i>What Country are we teaching on and how can we become aware of local Indigenous arts practices?</i> • <i>Can we connect with a local Indigenous artist or organisation from the outset to consult with on a proposed project?</i> • <i>What permissions do we need to seek from Indigenous Elders and artists? What is it that we can and can't do before proceeding further?</i> • <i>How can we respect and centre Indigenous protocols?</i> • <i>How will we allow time for a project to evolve and grow within our institutional settings?</i> • <i>How can we work with school leadership to allocate budgets towards learning about Indigenous knowledges through art?</i> • <i>If there are no funds for this, why are they not prioritised?</i> • <i>What Institutional partnerships can join in the collective experience of learning-to-learn-with?</i> • <i>What resources can we engage with to build knowledge in this area?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Australian Indigenous Design Charter: Indigenous design charter</i> ▪ <i>Cross-curriculum Priorities: Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures</i> https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/cross-curriculum-priorities ▪ <i>Deadly Learning portal www.monash.edu/muma</i> ▪ <i>First Languages of the Monash University Collection</i> https://www.monash.edu/muma/collection/first-languages-of-the-monash-university-collection ▪ <i>Koorie Cross Curriculum Protocols: Koorie Cross-Curricular Protocols.pdf (vcaa.vic.edu.au)</i> ▪ <i>Narragunnawali Reconciliation Education, Subject Guides:</i> https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/about/subject-guides ▪ <i>Roadmap for enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries Indigenous road map An initiative from Museums Australia AMAGA</i> ▪ <i>The Eight Ways: www.eightways.online</i>

**Branching out Potentialities:
Purposefully Creating Conditions for *Learning-to-Learn-with***

As a purpose-driven collective of educators, we learnt so much from and with each other. Reflecting on our learning, we as authors have found shifts and strategies for future ways to ‘learn-to-learn-with-’ as we consider *openings* in our educational practice, *reverberations* into future ways to learn with provocations that spark new understandings of art/education/curriculum/museum intersections. The process of creating conditions to learn with are essential to our planning and the *excess*, the questions, that we still hold in moving forward into future projects where Indigenous respect is central. Our collaborative and consultative approach was innate to a tree-respectful process that assembled the needs of the children, the sequence of activities, teachers, artworks, Indigenous knowledge holders, the culturally marked tree, artists, partners, consultation, Covid, safety, protocols, materials. This space for communal learning grounded in lived experience felt safe, alive, playful and connected. The strength of our planning created optimal conditions for generating energy to learn with joy. This foundational planning and the creative process that ensued, enabled the museum and university setting to become participatory sites for affective intensities, brought about through sensory engagement with trees. Ours was a space for becoming pedagogical as the museum expanded its social potential in innovative ways. We are now invigorated to imagine future museum/teacher education fusions where inclusive and more-than-human perspectives encourage further dynamic learning as ways to challenge taken for granted approaches to art education.

And we remain grateful for the opportunity that this special generative project afforded us in deepening our knowledge of Indigenous connection to material and creative practice of these lands for more than 60,000 years.

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Moorina Bonini is a proud descendant of the Yorta Yorta Dhulunyagen family clan of Ulupna and the Yorta Yorta and Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung Briggs/McCrae family. Moorina is an artist whose works are informed by her experiences as an Aboriginal and Italian woman. Her practice is driven by a self-reflexive methodology that enables the reexamination of lived experiences that have influenced the construction of her cultural identity. By unsettling the narrative placed upon Aboriginal people as a result of colonisation of Aboriginal Australia, Bonini's practice is based within Indigenous Knowledge systems and brings this to the fore. Moorina holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from RMIT University and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from the Victorian College of the Arts. Moorina is currently a research candidate at Monash University where she is undertaking a PhD within the Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab.

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Carolyn was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia in 2019 for her significant service to the Indigenous community and she sees this national recognition as part of her role of an elder. She has undertaken studies in Language & Linguistics in the hope of recording her Boon Wurrung language in oral and written form, as well as a Doctorate in Philosophy – Media & Communication researching assisting urban Indigenous youth to understand Indigenous knowledge, which has been part of Carolyn’s life-long journey documenting the history of her ancestors.

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