I sometimes wonder where I’d be without Task Force, and I know I’d be sitting home still on a pension wondering where the hell I was going to. It’s Task Force that has given me the opportunity not only to further my education but to find out who I am in terms of my Aboriginality. There’s nothing I can really say to show them how much I care about them, but the staff have been fantastic in all the time I’ve been here as a student and as a counsellor. Mary Ann has been great. Without her I’d have collapsed halfway during last year. She’s tremendous. And the rest of the staff have been very supportive, and the students. Of course when I was a student, it was other students around me that gave me encouragement and the strength to stick it out. I think it’s really worthwhile and I always said I wanted a job here and I’ve got it. I don’t know how Mary Ann’s got the patience to put up with me; I much have stretched it so many times.

Task Force has become my life and I love it, and I hope that all the students feel the same way about it.

Our first speaker this morning is Wayne Atkinson, who came from Echuca to Task Force in the second intake in 1975. He was born in Mooroopna, Victoria, and attended Echuca Primary School and Echuca Technical High School. He worked as a butcher for five years, a truck driver for a Ready-Mix Concrete firm for three years and as a concrete/labourer for seven years, before coming to the
Institute. He has been an active member of the Aboriginal Community in his home state; played both football and basketball with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teams; is a musician playing Bass, Guitar, and vocals with the legendary Shades band; has been involved in a variety of community programs for Yorta Yorta people.

Wayne gained the Community Development Certificate and the Associate Diploma in Social Work and on graduation, returned to Echuca for a short while, before going to Melbourne where he worked in the Aboriginal Research Centre at Monash University. His interest in the history of his people led him to apply for a research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra, which allowed him to write a splendid history of the people who once lived on the Maloga and Cummeragunja Missions (1874-present). He was awarded an Aboriginal Overseas Study Award, travelling to America and Europe. On his return he produced a very interesting book on his experiences. An Associate Member of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, he is also a member of the oral history committee and the Yorta Yorta Clans Group.

At present he is enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts at La Trobe University, where he is majoring in Archaeology and History.

**Wayne Atkinson Task Force Student, 1975-77**

Thanks Margaret. Well that’s a pretty big introduction. Firstly I’d like to say Good Morning, brothers and sisters. Welcome to the second day’s session and I have a paper here which is a bit of a contradiction really for an oral historian because here I am collecting oral history and documenting it and when it comes to my turn to present something I’ve got to write it down on paper. So I really don’t know how you sort of compromise with that. However, the thing I’d like to talk about is the concept of Aboriginal community based and controlled research, and I want to raise some issues for people to think about, but I also want to incorporate in my talk the work that I’ve been doing in oral history and also those programs that I visited and learned from while I was in North America. I will present the paper and raise some issues that will be open for discussion.

**The Need for Aboriginal Community Based and Controlled Research**

Since the beginning of this century thousands of research projects have been conducted amongst Aboriginal communities. There is an increasing awareness, often annoying to communities, that this research usually does not come back to the community directly, either in the form of knowledge contributed to the community, or in the way of assisting communities to tackle present day social and economic problems. One does not have to remind Aboriginal people of the numerous research projects conducted in the past that in most cases have only benefited the interests of the researchers and not the Aboriginal community. Furthermore, most of these projects were subsequently shelved to gather dust in university libraries or research centres. This approach is otherwise known as the one-way research relationship.

With the increasing incidence of social problems stemming from poverty, unemployment, forced dispossession and dispersal from tribal land, together with the profound health problems, and the impact of mining developments in tribal areas, the urgency for community-based research to develop solutions to these problems is now felt as never before.
The need for Aboriginal community-based and controlled research was recently discussed at the National Aboriginal Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists’ Association Conference held in Perth, N.A.W.O.L.D.A. The need for community-based and controlled research was strongly supported and it was generally agreed that any present or future research focused on Aboriginal communities should be designed so that it assists Aboriginal communities and community based organisations in dealing with those problems mentioned. It was also agreed that community-based research should be done in constant consultation with the community, and provide training for Aboriginal people in research skills.

The concept of community based research has its roots in the general principle of self-determination. That is the right of Aboriginal people to determine their own futures and manage their own affairs through their own communities and community-based organisations. Indeed community-based and controlled research is a very important tool in helping Aboriginal communities to realize that goal.

In order to understand the urgency for community-based research more clearly, some past trends of thought in research need to be identified, together with some reasons why Aboriginal people were excluded from research work in general.

**Past Research Trends**

First, much early research was conducted for Government Departments responsible for the administration of Aboriginal affairs. This research provided the basic framework for the formulation of government policy.

A typical example of this was the joint Harvard/Adelaide Universities Project in 1938-39, focused on the question of assimilation. After fourteen months’ field work, which included 2,500 case studies and the collection of thousands of genealogies from throughout south-eastern Australia, this data was used to argue that Aborigines could be biologically absorbed into the white race without any fears of later throwing back.

The most distressing part of this research from an Aboriginal viewpoint, apart from its racist implications, is that the material collected, particularly the case studies, genealogies, and images remained inaccessible to Aboriginal researchers.

This applied to a recent project I conducted on Cummeragunja Reserve, where genealogies of every family living there were collected during the Harvard/Adelaide project in 1938. The project was conducted just before the walk-off, in 1939 when people packed up and left the reserve in protest over the conditions and management. I saw this information as a vital source in helping to establish what families were living there at the time and in reconstructing genealogical material for present day use. After many enquiries and investigations into the whereabouts of this material, I was unsuccessful in finding it. This experience, I am sure is shared by other Aboriginal researchers who like myself are faced with great difficulties and frustrations when trying to gain access to materials relating to our own cultural heritage? An open ended question that begs the question of what do we have to do to gain access to information about our own heritage?

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, research was conducted and used for the purpose of furthering people’s academic careers and was generally written for the academic community. This trend has
had two major disadvantages: research findings never found their way back to those that most needed to apply them; and Aboriginal people were more and more deprived of the right to be the authorities on their own history and culture as academics wrote more manuscripts about them.

Thirdly, Aboriginal people were excluded from research mainly because they did not have the required academic training in research theory and methodology. The underlying assumption here is that to be an authority in your own culture, one has to acquire a western education.

Finally, research was not community-based or controlled and no attempts were made to involve or provide training for Aboriginal people except for those token gestures made by some researchers. In some areas individual Aboriginal consultants were engaged to provide information to researchers. The accuracy of this information is questionable, in that is one person’s viewpoint an accurate representation of the total community’s views?

Fortunately, a lot of those past trends of thought are slowly changing. With the development of new technology and approaches in research, we are beginning to see a move away from these old trends. An example of this is the use of audio-visual equipment in the recording and documentation of oral material. A good example is some of the audio-visual projects conducted by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which have been community-based and aimed at presenting the Aboriginal viewpoint. They have also involved Aboriginal people and provided some training in audio-visual and research skills. Nevertheless, the Institute’s approach to research is still University orientated. That is, the tending of individual researchers to produce a pure research product mainly for the academic community. Another example of changing trends is the concept of applied research which is a major shift away from the pure academic approach. Although the early pure research studies contributed much to the theoretical knowledge of people’s history and the different cultural systems, recognition of the value of applied research was limited. Applied research is practical in that it is orientated toward the documentation or resolution of a problem. It is also intended in the research plan, that the research results will be turned back to the people who need to apply them.

Returning to the question of community-based research, it is one that is designed so that it comes from within the community, belongs to and is controlled by the community. It may include outsiders but in a co-operative or a two-way relationship that is sensitive to the viewpoints of the community. Community-based research can be an invaluable tool in community development as a means of finding out what the community needs and then helping the community gain the necessary skills and resources to meet those needs. An example of this in North American Universities is the American Indian Studies Centre in the University of California, Los Angeles. The Centre in its research focused on Indian communities uses the ‘Needs Assessment’ approach. That is, it assesses the particular needs of the community at the time and then designs its research projects accordingly. The projects are community-based and conducted in co-operation with the Indian community and the Centre, so that there is a two-way research relationship and the end product benefits the community in general.

I would like to conclude now by giving some further examples of community-based programs I was fortunate to visit and learn from in North America. These were community-based oral history programs being conducted on Indian Reservations by Indian people and other programs involving universities. I would also like to end by giving some experiences from the research I have been involved in amongst my own community in Victoria.
American Indian Programs:

Oral History:

Oral history is becoming recognised around the world as a major alternative source of historical information for researchers and historians. In Australia and in North America there is an urgency developing amongst Aboriginal people to record and document their histories from the Aboriginal viewpoint, so that it can be retained and passed on to following generations. At a time when a tremendous amount of cultural knowledge has already been lost, oral history is rapidly emerging as an important historical source for filling in the other side of the written account.

Indian Reservation Programs:

Those oral history programs being conducted on Indian reservations among the Apache, Navajo, Hopi and Sioux are all community-based and controlled. Indian oral historians are trained in research and oral history methodology, and are also well-read in Indian/American history. Most of the elders on these reservations still speak fluently in their traditional language so oral historians have to be able to communicate freely in the tribal language. These interviews are subsequently translated into English in the transcript. Programs are conducted in consultation with the community, and the materials collected remain with the community which are housed in the community colleges or cultural centre libraries. This material is open to researchers both Indian and non-Indian, and is also used in the development of curricula materials for teaching Indian studies on and off the Reservation. Funding of programs came from various sources, such as tribal councils, and many other endowments and foundations in the U.S.A.

The ultimate aim of these community-based programs is to provide Indian people, particularly the younger people, with an awareness and pride in their history and cultural heritage from the Indian viewpoint. The very basis of Indian identity and cultural heritage is tied to their roots with the land, and the continuity of that special relationship is reaffirmed through their oral history. This relationship is best expressed by Indian people themselves. This is what Indian historian, Simon Ortiz, of the Acoma people in New Mexico says about oral history:

‘Indian oral history is recognition of what has moral value. Passing on that oral history to another generation of people is an affirmation of that value. Elder Indian people say to the younger: These stories that are told to you from the past have a value that is your responsibility to carry on and teach your children. The elder people say respect that which has value. Respect this because it has relationship with you. Its value comes from that relationship. This history contains within it all the struggles that our people have gone through. Therefore, its continuance means the continuance of our current struggles of our lives.’

University Programs:

The University of Arizona in Tucson has a course on Indian oral tradition in their Indian Studies program. It is taught by an Indian person of Kiowa descent and is open to all students. This course provides an historical understanding of oral tradition and the transformation to written language. It also forms the basis for the development of skills in recording oral history.
Tribal Histories:

Another important concept involving universities and Indian communities is the development of tribal histories. These are books relating to the history of a particular tribe written and authorized by members of the tribal community. The American West Centre in the University of Utah has played a major role in development of oral history and in the production of tribal histories. Historians and researchers are subcontracted by the tribe to act as consultant co-ordinators of tribal history projects. It is clear from the model developed by the Centre that there is a strong commitment to the development of tribal expertise in research and in the building of knowledge banks within tribal communities. The Centre has had a long involvement with Indian communities and is aware of the problems involved in developing good co-operative relations between the tribal community and the University, and in working out the roles each should play. Some of the main features of a successful contract between the tribe and the Centre for the production of a tribal history are as follows:-

1. The contract must be with a legally recognised group within the tribe.
2. All money is to be administered by the recognised group.
3. Copyright and final editorial approval is to be in the hands of the tribal group.
4. The group elects one of the tribe to be a trainee historian to be trained in research methods and to assist in writing the history. Training is provided by the Centre in conjunction with the Newberry Library in Chicago. Trust must also be developed between the trainee and university helper.
5. Schools must be involved to negotiate what material is needed and the material must be checked for grade level by a competent person.
6. A committee of elders needs to work with the trainee for him/her to get advice and guidance from, and to be consulted throughout the research and documentation of the book.
7. All information about the tribe discovered in libraries or elsewhere should be copied, filed and stored by the tribe for its future use.

Through these community-based projects a tribe becomes more acquainted with the range of resource materials relating to its past. Such projects are ultimately aimed at bringing the tribe to a position where it re-assumes the role of being the authorities on their own history and cultural heritage.

All of these concepts could be easily adopted in Australia and in my overseas report, ‘A Look at North American Indian History Programs 1981’, recommendations have been made to the responsible institutions to make a commitment towards establishing and supporting the same programs here.

Finally, my own work in Victoria. In 1978 I conducted an oral history project amongst my own people of the Murray Valley region. This involved three years intensive work, researching, interviewing and documenting over fifty taped interviews with Aboriginal descendants. The end result of this was a lengthy manuscript on the history of Cummeragunja Reserve from written and oral accounts. The manuscript is called ‘A Picture from the Other SIDE’ which looks at the history from the written accounts and then crosses over to the Aboriginal viewpoint. The oral history
section provides some very startling accounts of the Reserve system from the real life experiences of Aboriginal residents, which sharply contrast with those interpretations made from written accounts.

This project was community-based, involved Aboriginal people, and has been used to train Aboriginal students in oral history methodology. Copies of the manuscript were fed back to the community and made accessible to the general community. At present I am doing further research for the manuscript, and hope to have it published for use in Aboriginal Studies courses in schools and in the wider community.

The recent research work I have been involved with is a report on the Aboriginal associations with the Murray Valley. This report was for the Land Conservation Council in Victoria who is investigating the present day use of public land in the Murray Valley with the view of making recommendations on future use.

This report looks at the whole history of Aboriginal associations with the area from traditional times to present day. In the report we have argued that in order to understand present day associations, one has to look at the history of forced changes and adaptations Aboriginal people have had to make from traditional times to present day, and the continuity of Aboriginal culture as it exists today. Present day associations are directly related to these forced historical changes and the continued associations are understood more clearly.

This project was done in constant consultation with the Aboriginal communities through local community-based organisations and was conducted jointly by an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researcher. Furthermore, the end result provides the basis for and is applicable to present day land rights and cultural heritage concerns. This model could also be adopted in other areas where Aboriginal people have experienced similar historical events, such as forced dispossession and dispersal from traditional areas of land.

In conclusion then, the need for community-based and controlled research, as pointed out in those concepts and programs discussed, are of fundamental importance to Aboriginal communities throughout Australia in helping them to deal with present and future social, cultural and economic problems.

Finally, I strongly recommend that there be a major shift by universities and other institutions involved in Aboriginal research work, to those approaches and concepts I have mentioned whereby Aboriginal communities through their own community-based and controlled research programs can gain the necessary skills and resources to assist them in their present and future struggles.

Wayne Atkinson
Task Force Student, 1975-77
LaTrobe University, Bundoora

waynera@unimelb.edu.au

http://waynera.wordpress.com/