

## **The Learning Circles Art project – transforming O Week at JCU**

Linda Ashton, Senior Arts Education Lecturer, JCU  
Kylie Bartlett, Learning Adviser, JCU  
Peter Hanley, Learning Adviser, JCU

*The Learning Circles is an imaginative community and public art project led by Art Education Lecturer Linda Ashton and the JCU Learning Advisers. As part of the project more than 3000 clay mandalas were made by first year students in 2008 as part of their orientation to the university.*

*The mandalas were then incorporated into a collaborative art installation on the internal wall of the Learning Centre (ground floor of the Library on the Townsville campus) near the Learning Advisers' Centre. The name "Learning Circles" was inspired both by the large circular windows in the wall and the hermeneutic "learning circles" facilitated by mentors who have been an integral part of JCU's O Week at JCU for the past 12 years.*

*This "nuts and bolts" presentation will showcase a digital diary of the project as a successful and, we believe, unique example of how a large scale art project can be incorporated into the orientation process.*

### **How "The Learning Circles" all began:**

In November 2007, a symposium for teachers of First Year classes was held as part of the JCU First Year Experience project. At this workshop, Art Education lecturer Linda Ashton (whose post doctoral expertise is in Public and Community Art) raised the prospect of some form of durable community art project being incorporated into the 2008 Orientation. At the time, the Learning Advisers were establishing a Learning Centre on the ground floor of the Library Building on the Townsville campus.

We realised that we had the perfect site for a large installation at the Learning Centre. It had what was once an external wall of the Library designed by architect James Birrell. This wall featured Le Corbusier style architecture with a series of multi-sized circular windows. The project would provide a wonderful opportunity for collaboration between Learning Support staff, academic staff, students and the wider University community.

Learning Advisers Peter Hanley and Kylie Bartlett met with Linda Ashton in the Learning Centre to brainstorm ideas and consider art medium, design concept, timeframe, logistics, cost and public art protocols. We came up with a design that would highlight the existing distinctive wall feature, be easy for students to make and to symbolise the iconic scholarship space. Even remote students in the Gulf and far West of Queensland would eventually contribute.

Once the first piece was attached we realised how appropriate this was and how the project would meet many of the goals of FYHE in the literature. Learning Circles are symbolic of learning communities - the communities highlighted by Vince Tinto at FYHE conferences

over the past 12 years. Incorporating radiating patterns would also feature growth, pathways, sunlight in the tropics, and interconnectedness among the learners.

**The plan:**

Linda came up with 9 basic shapes based on universal circular mandala motifs which could easily be made from clay, textured and patterned. These 9 shapes would unify the many individual design components for the installation. The clay used for the project is made with 50% recycled paper and the mandalas remained unglazed to minimise impact on the environment.

The JCU student mentors were the ambassadors for the Learning Circles project. As part of their training in February 2008 mentor leaders participated in a two hour mandala making workshop presented by Linda. There were 30 mentor leaders on the JCU Townsville campus. Their role was that of “mentors to the mentors” in each Faculty/School. Part of their 2008 training also involved the leaders demonstrating to their 250 peer mentors, the delicate art of mandala making.

Initially it was intended that the first year students would make their mandalas as part of the Orientation Week activities. However the tropical weather intervened and heavy rain made it impossible to hold the activity on most days of O Week. So, quite fortuitously, most of the mandalas were then made as part of first year programs and early classes in Study Period 1.

**How it grew:**

To our delight the delay in making clay pieces project facilitated a new momentum of its own, with more schools and students able to participate in the extended timeframe. Through publicity and invitation mentors would take the clay and texturing equipment to specific cohorts and classes of first year students and show them how to make their clay mandalas for the Learning Circles project. Participating groups included whole Biology practical classes, Anthropology classes, groups of Indigenous students from remote sites and International students as part of their Orientation program. While making the artworks was a goal, the main purpose in these early classes was as an ice-breaker. Students were encouraged to chat with new peers as they played with the clay, establishing new friendships and networks. Mentors and staff reported that these clay sessions were indeed very successful in this regard with first years also being informed about and excited that their contributions would eventually be part of the larger public art library installation.

In Study Period 2 a whole new phase of the project began with the installation carried out by a group of Linda’s Third Year Art Education elective students. With some weeks of staged designing and attaching, the huge 25m x 5m relief mural took shape and had special mirror, glass and decorative features added.

The Learning Circles project was officially welcomed to country by a local Indigenous elder and by JCU’s Deputy Vice Chancellor on December 1. It has amazed all who have seen it by its scale, collaborative effort and creativity. More than 1000 members of the 2008 First Year JCU community were part of the project – including students, mentors, teaching staff, professional support staff, children of staff and students, Pro Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors.

**The presentation:**

The nuts and bolts presentation will include the photo diary that has been kept by the project team since the inception of the project and testimonies by participating mentors and first year students

Following this, participants will be encouraged to discuss the possibilities for community art projects at their own institutions. Those present will be encouraged to explore the opportunities offered by such projects and also to reflect on the practicalities of introducing such initiatives.

**Conference themes addressed by the presentation include:**

- Building learning communities in FY
- Teaching and / or supporting large FY cohorts
- Best practise in peer to peer interaction in the FY
- Engagement and belonging – outside formal curriculum
- Academic & professional partnerships to enhance FYE
- Enhancing equity and participation