In September 2007, a young man called Mike Rennie won the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student of the Year award, which recognises outstanding achievements in vocational education. Mike’s winning qualification was a Certificate III in Radio Broadcasting, completed through the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA). BIMA is the not-for-profit organisation behind the Indigenous radio station 989fm and its Registered Training Organisation, Triple A Training. Mike’s mentor and the manager of BIMA, Tiga Bayles, also attended the awards ceremony. For Tiga and his colleagues, the win is a recognition of the importance of Indigenous media, particularly in terms of training and creative industries development.

When I rang to pass on my congratulations (Mike’s my cousin) he still couldn’t believe that he had actually won, despite the fact that he knows the value of community radio training better than most. Mike now works as a trainer himself, teaching radio to Indigenous young people on Cape York peninsula.

Mike (28) and his brother Dan (25) were adopted into my family as toddlers. They share the same birth mother who comes from the Kimberly and now lives in Darwin, where they sometimes visit. After leaving school, Mike studied to be a park ranger, but struggled to find work locally. Instead he became a landscaper and, later, a baker. In June 2004, both Mike and Dan began volunteering at 989fm (formerly 4AAA). The station, which commenced broadcasting under a community radio license in 1993, has a significant following. Under the guidance of Tiga Bayles, 989fm is more ‘mainstream’ than most community broadcasters – although it is completely unique in Brisbane, playing country and Indigenous music alongside Indigenous news. Bayles insists that Indigenous broadcasting does not have to sound amateur, that it should appeal to a wide audience and strive for economic independence. Training is essential to that mission.

Aside from the formal components of his training, Mike produced a 3 hour program 4 times a week, participated in the Gympie Muster and Telstra Road to Tamworth interviews and organised a sponsorship deal with Ellaways Music. He also worked on a national current affairs program called “The Wire” which is produced by the Triple A training team. He covered mining on Lake Cowal in NSW, the introduction of OPAL fuels in Central Australia and the proposed dam at Traveston Crossing in South East Queensland. Meanwhile, his brother Dan was employed as 989fm’s drive-time DJ and has become something of a local celebrity.

Mike now compiles AFL programming and produces his own half hour footy show. Both are broadcast on the National Indigenous Radio Service, a satellite service which distributes programming to Indigenous stations across the country. He also teaches classes at 989fm and travels to Cape York with Triple A Training Training.

Mike believes there is a real need for media training in remote Indigenous communities. Triple A Training has been quietly working towards improving skills in Cape York, focusing their attention not only on the benefits for individual students, but for the media system as a whole. After an initial pilot the Department of Education, Science and Training came on board for a two-year term, which they renewed in 2007. The Cape York communities possess their own radio production equipment and transmitters, provided through the federal government’s Remote Indigenous Broadcasting program. Triple A Training’s involvement has enabled the stations to make local programs, which they supplement with the NIRS service. Mike and his colleagues use online and face-to-face methods, visiting the townships of Weipa, Kowanyama, Aurukun, Cooktown and Wujal Wujal in the Daintree every 5-6 weeks. Participants are also flown down to Brisbane for one week of intense training at the 989fm studios.

The training takes place in schools where attendance can be as low as 30%. However, the fun of radio is getting kids back to class voluntarily. According to Bayles, the radio training has produced significant outcomes in terms of overall literacy, ‘making reading and writing relevant’ through tasks such as putting together an interview or reading the back of a CD case. Although accredited radio training has been available through TAFE colleges, Bayles believes that it can only succeed if it is designed for remote community needs and delivered by Indigenous media trainers.
For the past 20 years at election time, I have been a Dec vote officer. This means that I issue the blank voting forms to people who DECLARE they are entitled to vote. They fall into two categories. Those who claim they have the right to vote in the electorate but are not on the electoral roll (provisional voters) or those that are out of their electoral area but within the state, in which cases they require an absentee vote.

Before Election Day polling officials including Dec vote officer undertake training – they work through a book and attend a formal training session. I generally look forward to these as I know the trainers, and occasionally meet with other old war horses. As an educator I look forward these sessions with a ‘professional eye’. Training is generally well presented, although sometimes it does not allow for ‘individual differences’.

This election there were some changes to the processes. For the first time, provisional voters wanting a Dec vote needed to produce some form of official identification (ID). The Dec official had to sight the identification and match the type of ID to a list printed on the back of the Dec vote envelope. If no ID was presented, the Dec vote issuer was to give the person a special form which had to be filled in and returned to the electoral commission office within 5 days with a certified copy of some form of ID. Once that was done the vote would be sorted and counted.

Each Dec vote official has a series of tasks to do – provisional voters, have to provide name, address and ID which is written on the back of the Dec vote envelope. They sign the envelope declaring that they have formally identified themselves and what they have said is true. The voters are then given the appropriate voting papers, identified themselves and what they have said is true. They sign the envelope declaring that they have formally identified themselves and what they have said is true.

For the Indigenous sector, more intensive programs are required in order to raise digital literacy within communities, skill-up local media workers and create culturally appropriate courseware. Vocational training stands for jobs and sustainable industries. In the creative industries, training also results in social and cultural outcomes. Mike Rennie might be surprised that his community radio training could take him so far. In fact, it makes a great deal of sense.

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