

‘Trying to work together’: Writing a collaborative book in COVID-19

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Abstract

We will remember COVID-19 not just for its interruption to our personal and working lives, but also for the way it influenced the writing of the new edition of our textbook *Yatdjuligin: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Care*. *Yatdjuligin* is Australia’s first undergraduate-level text about Indigenous health issues written by Indigenous nurses, midwives and health practitioners. We produced the first two editions of the book using a collaborative, relational process informed by Indigenous practices. Producing the third edition of *Yatdjuligin* during COVID-19 required new ways of working. Instead of meeting face-to-face and spending time together as Indigenous people, we collaborated online in the best ways we could. We collaborated to the fullest extent possible, sharing both the work and our lives. We supported each other when COVID-19 brought new pressures, particularly for members of our collaborative who are also frontline health workers. While our circumstances and communication changed with COVID-19, we maintained our individual identities, subjectivities, experiences, knowledges and truths, and built on our relationality and collegiality to meet our writing goals to deliver the third edition of an award-winning, Indigenous-authored and edited book for the tertiary sector.

Keywords *Aboriginal; Torres Strait Islander; Indigenous; Nurses; Midwives; Yatdjuligin; COVID-19; Coronavirus; Australia*

‘Trying to work together’: Writing a collaborative book in COVID-19

Introduction

We will remember the global COVID-19 pandemic not just for its interruption to our personal lives and our lives as staff in higher education. We will also remember the way it influenced our work on the new edition of our book, *Yatdjuligin: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Care*. The pandemic forced us to work differently and find other ways to co-create that built on what we had done in the past. It challenged us to remain true to our Indigenous processes and our collaborative content creation while being physically separate.

In this paper, we explain the collaborative processes we used to develop the first and second editions of *Yatdjuligin* and reflect on the adaptations we introduced to write the third edition during the pandemic. COVID-19 changed our circumstances, communication practices and work pressures. But we maintained our individual identities, subjectivities, experiences, knowledges and truths. As a collective of health practitioners and Indigenous health activists, we found a way to build our relationality and collegiality and meet our writing goals.

Yatdjuligin’s place

Yatdjuligin is the first textbook written by Indigenous nurses, midwives and health professionals that addresses Indigenous health issues relevant to Australia’s nursing and midwifery workforce. The pages of *Yatdjuligin* speak to the personal, communal, historical, cultural, spiritual, sexual, social and emotional holistic elements of health and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians. It is an undergraduate-level textbook and, since its release in 2014, has become a mandated part of the curriculum of many nursing and midwifery courses in Australia. It began as a small idea and has since grown into a major collaboration that has fundamentally

changed the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is taught in Australia. In 2015, it was awarded a national publishing award (the Australian Publishers Association award for Best Tertiary (Wholly Australian) Teaching and Learning Resource).

The title *Yatdjuligin* was gifted to us by Aboriginal Elder Ivy Booth. Yatdjuligin is from the dialect of the Wakgun Clan group of the Gurreng Gurreng Nation. It translates as ‘talking in a good way’. For Wakgun people, Yatdjuligin is deeply embedded in learning, belonging to a two-part process of passing on knowledge about Country, its resources, and the resources’ uses. While Yatdjuligin is positive, it can also be confronting. Passing on knowledge can be difficult – the knowledge itself may be difficult to understand, people may not want to know it, or they may not be ready to learn. Learning can cause discomfort, because learners become aware of the inaccuracies of their past learning or recognise displeasing aspects about themselves. The authors who contributed to our book recognise this aspect of Yatdjuligin within the text.

Yatdjuligin was the first nursing text written from the theoretical perspective of cultural safety, addressing Indigenous health issues in a way that is appropriate and accessible for nursing students (see Ramsden, 2002). It is part of a slow movement that began in the 1970s, with the gradual embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health content within the nursing and midwifery curriculum at various Australian universities. Over time, Indigenous cultural perspectives have become increasingly recognised in healthcare and cultural safety in nursing (Best, 2014; Best & Cox, 2019). Most recently, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia’s (NMBA, 2018) *Code of Conduct for Nurses* and *Code of Conduct for Midwives* adopted health professional standards which include cultural safety. However, before *Yatdjuligin*, the available information tended to focus on Indigenous Australians as patients

only, with little recognition that Indigenous Australians may also be co-workers and other health professionals.

Writing the first edition

We started to write *Yatdjuligin* in 2012. Right from the beginning, we were committed to being inclusive and collaborative in our selection of authors and our approach to writing. We put out a call for authors and assembled a group of nine nurses and midwives plus two health researchers. The nurses and midwives working on the first edition were Odette Best, Ali Drummond, Lynore Geia, Machel Kosiak, Ray Lovett, Nicole Ramsamy, Juanita Sherwood, Deanne Hellsten, and Raelene Ward – who collectively have around 150 years of clinical and healthcare practice. Two non-nurses participated in the first edition: Elder Uncle Mick Adams, who had completed his PhD in Indigenous men’s sexual and reproductive health, and Senior Aboriginal woman Professor Bronwyn Fredericks, who had completed her PhD in Aboriginal women’s health and wellbeing. Both had extensive experience as board members and CEOs of Indigenous health organisations and had worked within government health departments.

We had never written a textbook before, and we knew it would be challenging. We also knew we needed to keep our costs down and do much of the work ourselves—both to enact what the book means and what *Yatdjuligin* means, and also to keep the book at an accessible price. We used a collaborative process, with face-to-face writing workshops in Brisbane, Cairns and Ipswich where we workshopped what we wanted our book to be, what the individual chapters might cover, and how the chapters would combine into the whole book. We physically came together and workshopped, discussing through the processes of book publication, shared laughs and tears, and shared meals (Figures 1, 2, 3). Some of the authors sought funding to support travel and cost if they could, and at other times stayed with family, friends and other authors.

We shared how early activists would travel to meet with each other and ‘bunk in’ where they could and do what was required to get what was needed done. We saw this level of commitment and perseverance in the authors in the first and second published editions. Those that wanted to be funded for travelling or writing dropped off, as neither we nor the publishers had funding for this type of expenditure.

In producing the first edition, and then the second edition, we (as editors) worked with all the authors through a collective process of sitting together, listening and participating in dialogue so we could all share in constructive feedback to produce our best work (Brady, 1994; Donnelly, 2010; Fitzgerald, 1995; Green, 2001). Our process aimed to foster collaboration, not competition (of the type so often evident in higher education) (Brien 2007; Fredericks & Brien, 2014; Heiss, 2003). In between our face-to-face meetings and workshops, we supported each other with phone calls, emails and texts.

What the process demonstrated to us was that the face-to-face interaction and connectivity were an essential part of our collaboration and gave us a solid basis for our future work.

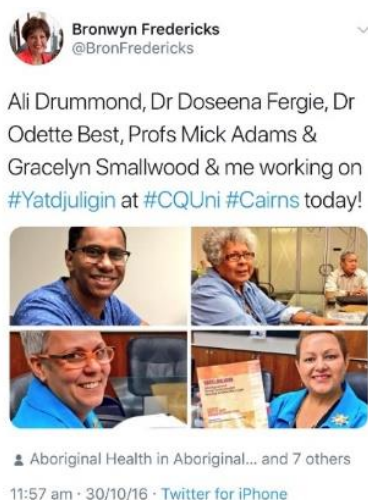


Figure 1

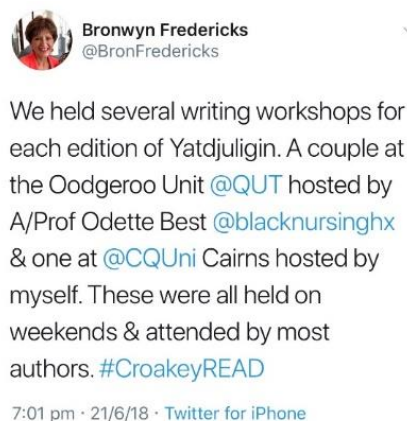


Figure 2



Figure 3

Although we secured a publisher (Cambridge University Press), we were conscious of the need to provide high-quality content. We organised and paid for our own copy editing, and we are thankful that the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) contributed towards the costs and Dr Judy Gregory for her editing work. When *Yatdjuligin* was published in 2014 (Figure 4), we collaborated on the promotion. We all participated in numerous speaking events and engagements, including a launch, conference presentations and radio interviews (e.g., Kelly, 2014). Some of these we did together, while others we did individually due to costs and the events' disciplines.

Yatdjuligin received a great response and Cambridge University Press soon asked us to prepare a second edition, which was published in 2018. We took the opportunity to add three new chapters and followed the same collaborative process of supporting the authors through face-to-face-writing workshops and meetings, plus lots of phone calls and emails. In essence, the collaboration for the second edition followed a similar collaborative process as the first edition.

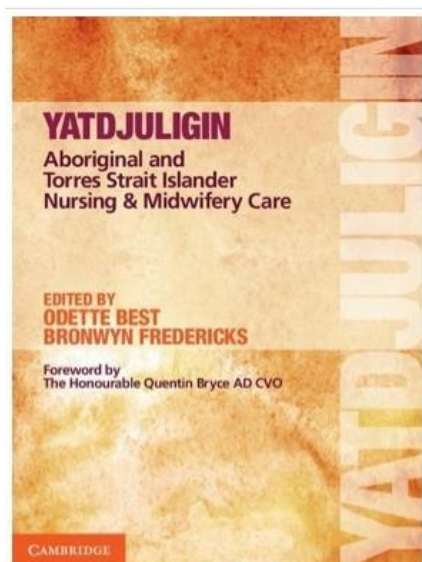


Figure 4 (*Yatdjuligin*, Best & Fredericks, 2014)

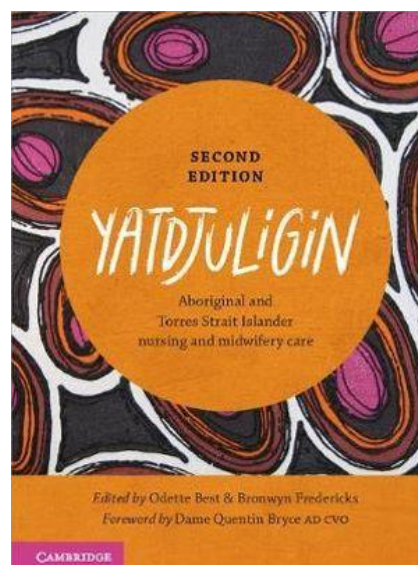


Figure 5 (*Yatdjuligin*, Best & Fredericks, 2018)

Writing *Yatdjuligin* during COVID-19

In 2019, Cambridge University Press asked us to develop a third edition of *Yatdjuligin*, for release in 2020 – scheduled to coincide with the World Health Organisation’s declaration of Year of the Nurse and Midwife. Once again, we worked together to identify gaps and put out a call for new authors. We decided to add four chapters, one focused on issues relevant to the Torres Strait Islands, and three addressing specific disciplines within nursing, such as Indigenous nurse-led quantitative research. We also identified co-authors for the chapters on mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, and aged care.

Our authors’ collective grew, giving us new opportunities to work together, share power in decision-making, share the writing workload and revise the chapters in the best way possible. As we assembled our authors’ collective, we were aware that our differing identities, subjectivities, experiences, knowledges and truths, along with our relationality with and to one another and our collegiality is what gives our writing and our book power (Fredericks, Mills & White, 2014; Fredericks, White, Bunda, & Baker, 2011; Fredericks, White, Phillips, Bunda, Longbottom, & Bargallie, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2015, 2020).

While we were engrossed in developing new content for *Yatdjuligin*, the COVID-19 and planning for face-to-face meetings and workshops, the pandemic hit. Its impact on our work was three-fold: it transformed our writing practice, spun the spotlight on nurses in a way no one could have predicted, and spun the spotlight on particularly vulnerable populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Several of our authors are frontline health workers who work directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in clinics or hospital environments. For example, Nicole

Ramsamy is a Nurse Practitioner in Weipa and Napranum, and Machel Kosiak and Gracelyn Smallwood both work as midwives in large urban hospitals. While the revisions to *Yatdjuligin* were important, we were all aware that frontline workers were under considerable pressure. As writers we needed to be mindful of the stresses being experienced by each member of our collective.

For us as Indigenous writers, our personal and professional lives are not separate. We see everything as being in relationship. Part of our response to COVID-19 meant being flexible and sensitive with each other. At times, authors had to step back from the project because they were carrying a heavy load within the health system and in keeping community safe. Sometimes supporting each other also meant active listening almost as a clinical or community health peer. Others stepped in and picked up the writing work when they were able to.

We re-negotiated the timelines for the third edition several times, as did the publisher. Successful collaboration in the context of COVID-19 required us all to communicate clearly and work towards an agreed but flexible plan of action. Our progress was hindered by unexpected and unplanned interruptions, including at least one family member of an author contracting COVID-19. This meant she needed to provide direct support to her family. Our work was also influenced by the rapid changes put in place by government, local authorities, Aboriginal Medical Services and universities. We developed a dynamic, open and changing way to collaborate across multiple platforms, always focused on our goal of getting the book done. Travel restrictions clearly made it impossible to continue with our face-to-face meetings or even contemplate writing workshops.

Even though our writing was influenced by COVID-19, we were still committed to undertaking the book and to finding ways to share our ideas, concerns, issues and dilemmas in developing and writing the chapters. We engaged online, all isolated in our safe environments, and succeeded in undertaking “joint collaborative” writing practice even while physically separated (Brien & Brady, 2003). Brien and Brady (2003) explain joint collaborative writing practice as “two or more writers/artists [who] work together on a single product producing a seamless text unrecognisable as belonging in part to any individual collaborator” (np). In our collaborative writing, we were all involved as both writer and editor, in a dynamic relationship.

In the third edition of *Yatdjuligin*, our collaborative process drew on our individual understandings and our differing education, work and life experiences (Brady & Krauth, 2006; Bruner, 2004; Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019) – exactly as it had done for the previous editions. We had to rely on the knowledge we had of each person and how we all worked through what had happened before, along with trust each other deeply with the work. We wonder if we had not had the experiences from the first two editions if we would have had this ability to do this so confidently in the third edition. We had to share documents with each other online when maybe we would have discussed them with each first while sitting side by side. We used our physical closeness as a strength and used it to our advantage in ways that we were unable to do for this edition. We needed to speak via Facetime, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other electronic platforms. We could still see each other, but not touch or hug each other when we needed it when things got tough or someone passed away or when there was another death in custody.

What we were able to do was tease out how to communicate stronger verbally and in writing with one another. Authors received more detailed tracking, and explanations and examples of

what they could do to improve their work. The sharing of active learning (Hayler & Thomson, 1995) and collaborative research (Richardson, 2003) from sitting in a room with one another to being on electronic platforms, to using the feedback mechanisms built into the platforms needed to be drawn upon to our advantage. It was hard at first, but we had little choice. We helped different people who had little computer literacy and limited access to internet, and this became part of their learning too. The contracts for the book were all online for this edition, and this was coordinated centrally, which made a difference and helped us all. There was no mailing out contracts between authors and the publisher. were both impacted upon in this new edition.

COVID-19 forced us to seek new ways to create dialogue, resulting in a system of collaborative conversations with separate individual tasks that contributed towards completing the book. Our collaboration happened through Zoom rooms, phone conversations and emails. Sometimes this was difficult, and we were conscious that we were unable to address problems by sitting together in the Indigenous way. We found the online systems a less-satisfying substitute. We had to hold each other to account in gentle ways, but also, we needed to be accountable for our actions and inactions.

Throughout the project, we connected over and over again. We shared not just our progress on our paragraphs and chapters, but what was happening in our lives. Those of us who lived close to each other shared meals in our homes. With our more distant collaborators, we shared photographs and recipes. We also gave each other bottles of native honey, emu fillets, bunya nuts (Figure 6) and objects made with or containing images of our favourite things.

We noticed one clearly positive result of our new approach to collaborative writing: the walls between the inside and outside of our organisations seemed to fade more easily. In the past, we had been conscious of our separate organisations and their relationships. We came to know the organisations we all worked in via the backgrounds, locations, and the software and platforms they used and who at times would pop up or walk past the authors on screens. Partners, kids or patients could sometimes be heard in the backgrounds when the authors would call in or be on zoom. At other times we might have needed to talk about someone who had passed away, the Black Lives Matter rallies or an Indigenous policy launch more than the book. If we did, we did this to support each other. This time, it was more about us as individual authors. This is neither a positive or negative outcome, since we as Indigenous people naturally work with and without our organisations; it's simply something we noticed. What we managed has been part of the life we have all been living at this time, and about our continuum experiences as Indigenous peoples. With and without COVID-19, we engage as Indigenous people who are also nurses and health professionals, practitioners, academics and writers within this same continuum of life within these contemporary times.



Figure 6

COVID-19 created changed working conditions that forced us to rethink our Indigenous practices. We couldn't sit and be together as we like to be. However, it still enabled us to use

the act of writing and the tools of writing a book together as a form of activism. *Yatdjuligin* is almost a form of resistance, because it is written about us and by us. The thread of Indigeneity weaves throughout all three editions, and we are thankful that technology enabled us to produce the third edition in spite of the pandemic. Indigeneity feeds into the rhythm of the book in the same way that rhythm sustains the movement in oceans over the long term.

Conclusion

Writing within an academic context can sometimes be a site of contradiction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: we are told to write in a way that suits the White, middle-class academy, but at the same time we are encouraged to write using our voices and be true to ourselves as Indigenous peoples. We are also encouraged to write more. Writing three editions of *Yatdjuligin: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Care* has shown us that we can do both. Our book meets a need within the tertiary sector, even when the sector wasn't originally aware the need existed.

Our writing practice for *Yatdjuligin* demonstrates that we don't need to jeopardise ourselves as Indigenous peoples in order to write well and have our voices heard. Our book gives us confidence that we can work collaboratively, in ways that support each other professionally, personally and culturally. We still prefer to collaborate face-to-face. But COVID-19 has shown us that we can collaborate remotely while ensuring our individual identities, subjectivities, experiences, knowledges and truths are honoured and respected. As a collective of authors, we were able to collaborate in new ways to successfully deliver the third edition of *Yatdjuligin*, and become more intertwined, interconnected and invigorated by our individual and collective contributions and achievements. We successfully delivered the text for the third edition of *Yatdjuligin*, which will be released in 2021 (Best & Fredericks, in press).

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