

Natural Born Fighter

Natural Born Fighter is an innovative Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Project that developed an interactive film/multimedia resource to increase the literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous people in regional and remote Australia wanting to establish a small business.

In the 2011 ABS Census, 548,370 people identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. According to the 2011 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had a younger age distribution than the non-Indigenous population, reflecting both higher fertility rates, and lower life expectancy. The median age for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was 21 years, compared with 37 years for non-Indigenous people. The 2011 Census found there was an increase in the number of people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and a significant proportion (25%) of this population, aged 15 years and over, live in remote communities.

Although there are significant opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to establish businesses and develop economic independence in regional and remote communities, Indigenous people are less likely to start a small business than their mainstream counterparts. Data in the 2006 Census identified that 6% of the Indigenous population were self-employed, compared to 16% of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Indigenous people may start a small business for a range of reasons including developing individual economic independence, providing employment for their family, or meeting a social or cultural need in their community. Ford (2006) identified the main motivators for Indigenous people establishing businesses in his case studies were to provide financially for their families, and to provide employment opportunities for family members. In regional and remote locations, community life is often more strongly framed within the obligations one has to land and family or kinship. While the profit making endeavours of business may be important, the contribution to social outcomes for the community may be equally valued.

In a research project that studied 50 Indigenous, self-employed entrepreneurs over a nine year period, Foley (2006) identified some of the key characteristics of successful

Indigenous business entrepreneurs. In his study entrepreneurs were an average age of 43 years, were mainly male (84%), had been in business for 10 years, and had a knowledge of their industry spanning almost 17 years. About half the cohort were married to a non-Indigenous spouse, and they were educationally well-qualified (52% had tertiary qualifications and another 20% had trade qualifications). Foley's report suggests that there is a strong correlation between success in establishing and maintaining a small business, and education levels.

Indigenous people can face a number of unique barriers in starting and maintaining a small business. They often have limited exposure to business concepts and models, no access to start up finance and small business networks, and minimal marketing and financial management experience and skills (Rola-Rubzen 2009). In a 1995 paper Martin describes the additional pressures Indigenous people may experience in managing a small business in a remote community. He describes the tensions and contradiction these entrepreneurs may experience between what he calls autonomy (accumulation) and relatedness (distribution). Indigenous people may wish to develop a small business to generate income for themselves and their family, but may feel culturally obligated to distribute business income in ways and at times that do not support effective business management.

Literacy and numeracy levels can be a major barrier to establishing and maintaining a successful small business. There is limited data on the language, literacy and numeracy levels of Indigenous adults in Australia, particularly those who live in remote communities. However, by age 15, more than one-third of Australia's Indigenous students lack adequate literacy, language and numeracy skills and knowledge such that their reading level inhibits their ability to meet real-life challenges and may well leave them disadvantaged in their lives beyond school (Bortoli and Cresswell, 2004). Given the importance of educational attainment in Foley's study of successful entrepreneurs, the literacy and numeracy levels of potential small business operators, (particularly those in remote locations) is a significant barrier to the establishment and ongoing management of small businesses.

A number of research reports informed the construction of this WELL Resource Project. The specificity of the Indigenous small business context requires the development of learning resources tailored to Indigenous experiences and ways of

learning. In 2004, Golding suggested that small business training resources for Indigenous people need to be:

- Experiential
- Developed for learners with low literacy and numeracy levels
- Focused on explaining and developing understanding of fundamental business principles
- Able to recognise and relate to the cultural needs of the learners
- Use relevant role models.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people come from strong oral cultures with narrative or story-telling as a central means of knowledge transmission. With no history of written text in these cultures, training resources need to use the oral preference of Indigenous learners as a means of engaging the learner in written text.

Dockery (2009) emphasises the strong interdependence that individual, place and community hold for Indigenous people and articulates the benefits of integrating and linking culture into the development of education and training in remote areas.

It is against this background that Natural Born Fighter was developed. Funded by the WELL Programme the resource uses as its central focus the real-life story of an Indigenous man establishing a fitness/boxing business.

Specifically, the resource uses:

- A documentary that follows an Indigenous man (Brian) as he establishes his boxing/fitness business, Natural Born Fighters
- Development of the 3D animation characters of Brian and his Indigenous mentor (Elva) discussing issues Indigenous people experience when starting a small business
- Interactive literacy, language and numeracy activities that support the building of the knowledge and skills Indigenous people need to establish a small business.

Business literacy and numeracy skills and understanding are developed through the use of a documentary which provides an authentic narrative for the learner; animated characters who discuss business concepts as well as family and cultural issues; interactive activities centred on the decoding of business language and concepts; explanations of key business documents and an interpretation of the Australian Tax

Office requirements; and the interpretation and comprehension of small business planning and financial documents.

It is hoped that Natural Born Fighter will make a valuable contribution to the range of strategies and resources Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can use to become successful business owners.

References

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