

# The Learning Circles ...



a community art project and  
first year university  
welcoming strategy

Linda Ashton,  
Peter Hanley &  
Kylie Bartlett



FYHE James Cook University 2009

**The Learning Circles installation is the result of a year long collaborative community art project.**

**The work was specifically designed for  
JCU's Eddie Koiki Mabo Library  
(Townsville Campus)**



In 2007 Linda Ashton (Education and Arts), Kylie Bartlett and Peter Hanley both from from Teaching and Learning Development, met to discuss the possibility of a community art project for the JCU mentor program with first years. We met in the Learning Centre where many first year students go for academic support.

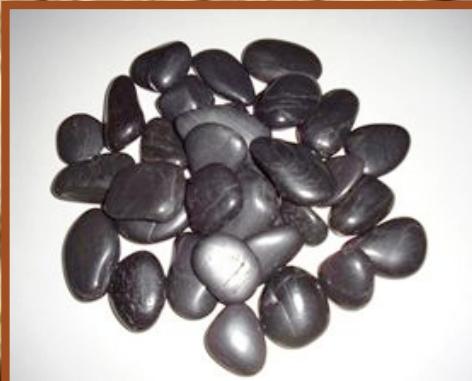
The large concrete wall begged adornment and provided both the site for the Learning Circles and inspiration for the name.



From the outset our aim was to make as light an environmental footprint as possible.

Using clay which was 50% recycled paper helped with this intent.

The completed project utilised very humble materials .... clay, black and white stones and glass nuggets.



The ancient medium of clay has unique beauty in its diverse natural and manipulated states.



Why clay  
seemed so  
appropriate ...

North Qld has rich clay deposits

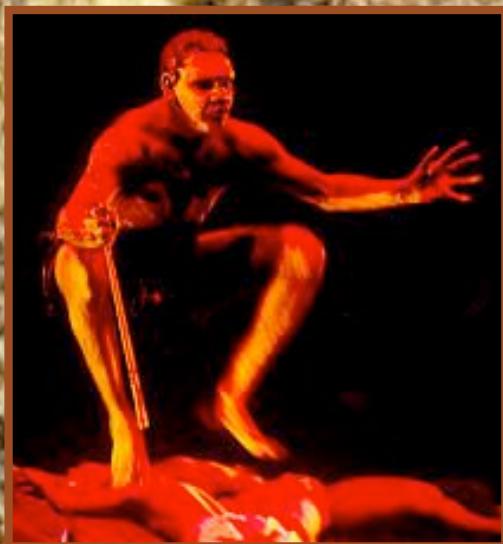


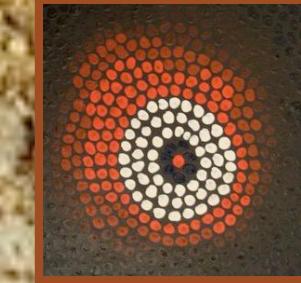
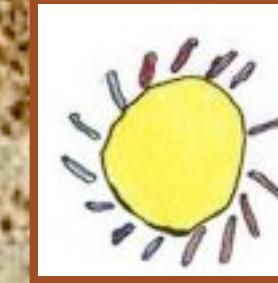
#### Soils

- Bare Rock
- Calcareous Earths
- Clays
- Duplex Soils
- Loams
- Massive Earths
- Organic
- Sands

Source: Bureau of Rural Sciences

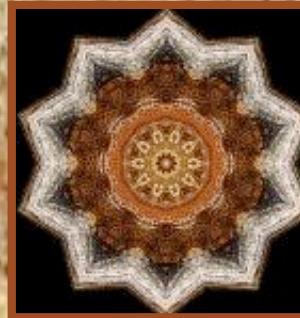
Clay colours (ochres) symbolise the Australian landscape and feature in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal artforms.





**Why circles?**

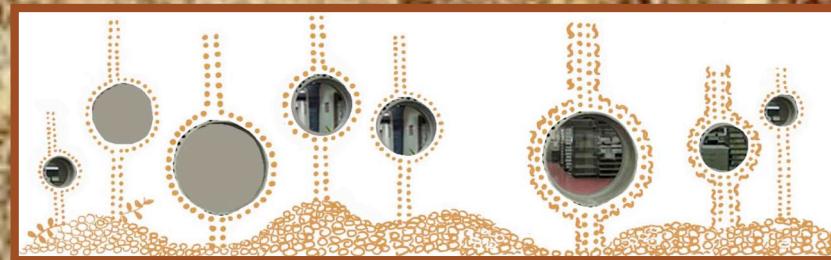
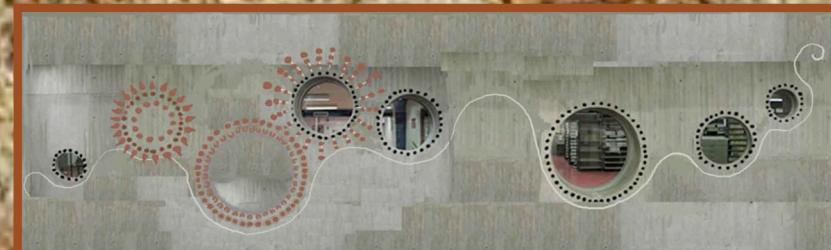
**They are cross- cultural symbols for sun, gatherings and natural cycles.**



**Mandalas would complement the iconic circular library windows designed by architect James Birrell in 1968.**



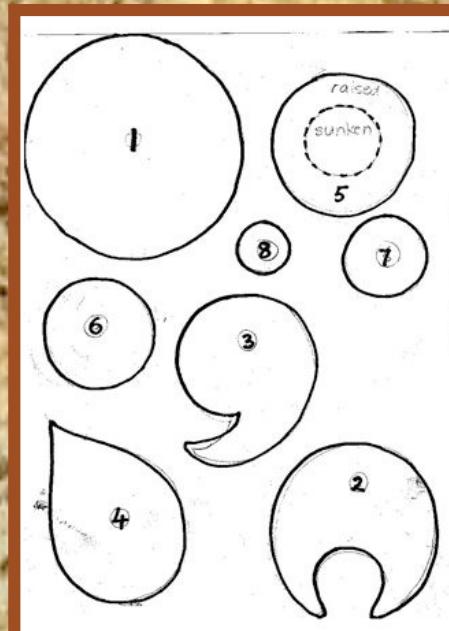
The design process began in February 08 with digital photography and photoshop maquettes.



Knowing that  
hundreds and maybe  
thousands of people  
would be participating,  
presented a design  
challenge ...

... how to cater for  
individuality of input  
while maintaining unity  
in such a large  
composition?

We solved this by  
having a fairly set  
range of shapes ...  
and limiting colours to  
the natural ochre  
range.



**Formal application was made to the University.  
Our design proposal and plan for completion  
were approved in time for O-week activities.**



**- week**

**JCU student mentors were trained in the delicate art of  
mandala making & equipped with clay kits. They held  
workshops in O-week, in semester one early classes  
across the campus, and again after the mid-year intake.**



First years students from every Faculty were involved.



Speech pathology mandala making session



Though initially targeting first years, the project gained a momentum of its own especially when the clay workshops were set up out doors. Staff joined in.



Indigenous Education students from remote sites joined in.



Friends and families ...  
even senior management  
joined in!





In semester 2 2008, 25 B.Ed students were enrolled in Linda Ashton's public art subject. They made more mandalas and installed the Learning Circles as part of their final year education studies.

## Some of the B.Ed “installation team”







**Part of the library's permanent art collection includes a ceramic work by Peter Travis, 1968.**

**The panel is displayed in the stairwell on the opposite side of the site selected for the Learning Circles.**

**Clay impressions from the Travis work were incorporated into the new project.**

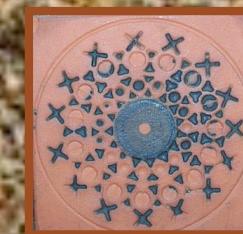
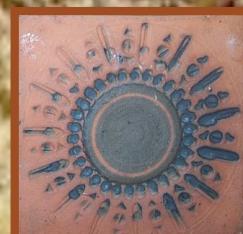


**The two ceramic works symbolise how university communities have become much more diverse over the last 40 years.**

**They also mirror how approaches to teaching and learning have changed dramatically.**

**The Travis panel is very geometrically ordered, made with precast templates and completed by a sole professional artist.**

**The Learning Circles work would be collaborative, each piece hand made and largely the result of volunteer effort.**



The 3500+ O-week clay pieces were bisque-fired to 1000 degrees celcius.



Sorting and counting the pieces as they were fired was essential so we could plan the various window designs and connecting patterns.







The Learning Circles project featured on JCU Open day 08 with information, images, clay for the public to work with and lots of mandalas to varnish. The exhibit attracted lots of interest.

The visiting public, staff and students produced around 500 new pieces on the day.





The JCU chaplain made his mark.





Children enjoyed making patterns with the fired ceramic samples and pebbles on display.







**The Vice Chancellor sat with future university students and made her mark.**





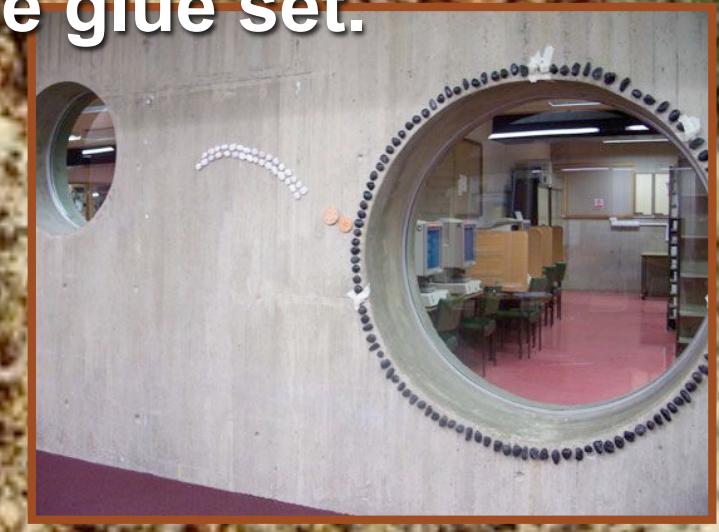
In August 2008 the first 2 mandalas  
were blue tacked near a porthole window ...  
a preview of the final composition.



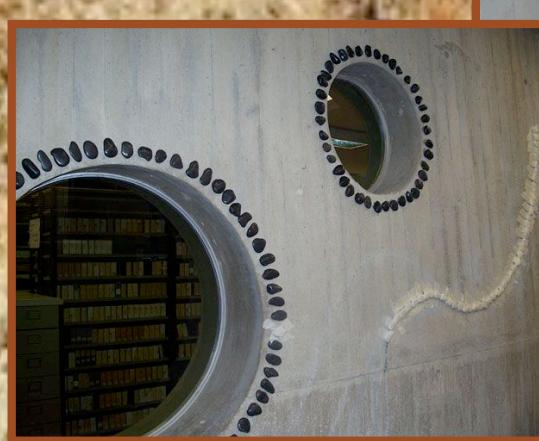
By September 2008 it was time to begin installing.



Large black pebbles were glued on first around each window. Every single stone & clay piece had to be taped overnight while the glue set.



High tech guidelines were drawn onto the wall - a stick with chalk taped on.



Designs were arranged on the carpet, digitised and checked by peers or project manager before being installed.





**Groups worked on specific windows with selected ceramic shapes but everyone eventually worked on different parts of the wall.**

**Once the gluing started it was all hands on deck and, for some, up a ladder!**



This process was greatly facilitated through sponsorship by Twin Cities Glass & Aluminium including 6 laser cut circular mirrors.



The circular windows  
were more than design  
focal points ... they  
were heaps of fun!



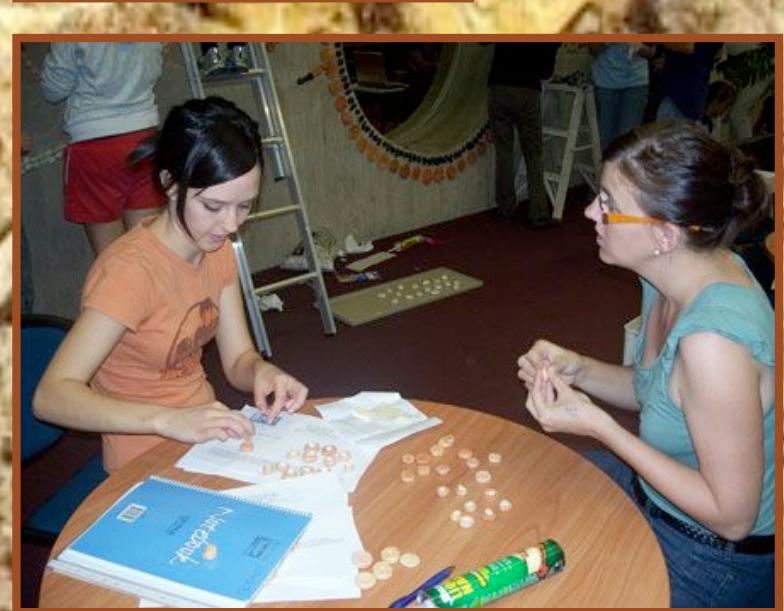


# We varnished ...



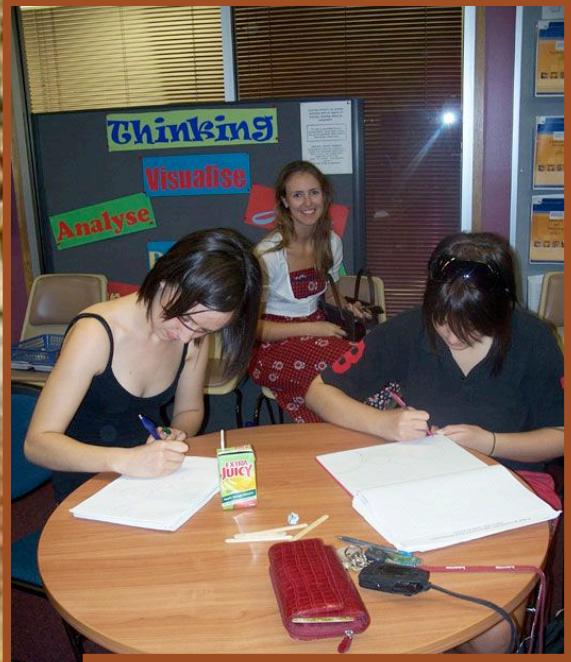
... and measured and glued and taped



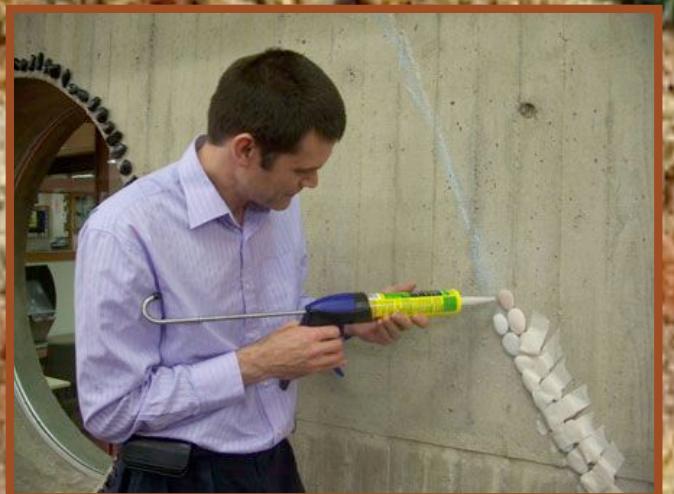


As well as working safely (ladder buddies, gloves and masks) each artist was responsible for QAP ... Quality Assurance Process.

QAP forms were completed after each installation session with peer evaluation and project manager input.



Anybody who strolled by was invited to assist ... and many took on the challenge ...



Long rhythmic lines soon connected the clay mandalas as permanent pieces of the library space.



Some smaller pebbles from the original rock garden outside the library made their way into the design.





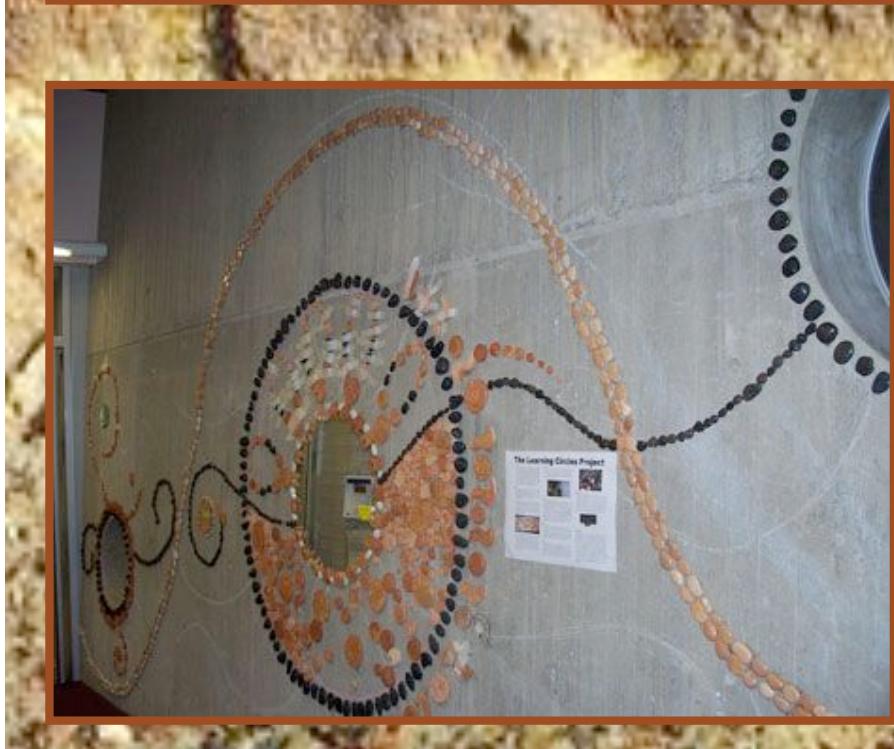
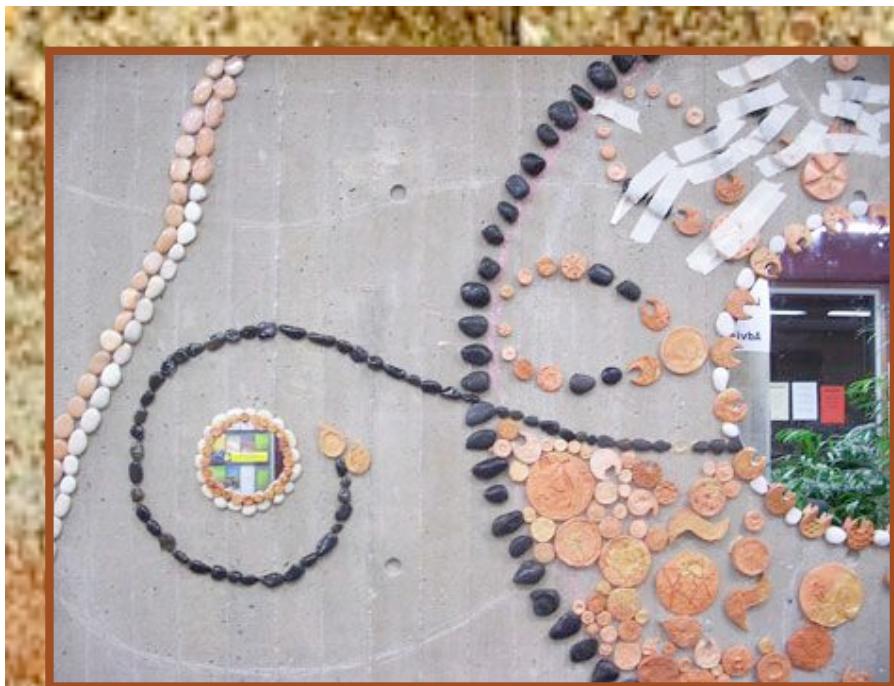
Local community artist Janine Jumeau, who had assisted with previous JCU community art projects, became a regular and welcome weekly guest.





**Design confidence grew as each artist gained a shared sense of the composition and themes emerging.**





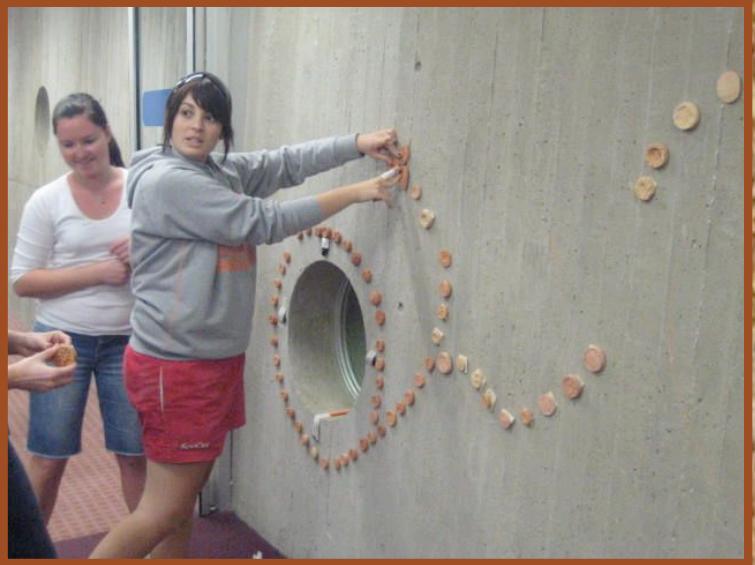














Once the main window designs and connecting pebble lines were secured, it was time for some serious bling!



Large clear rondels added the final touch. First years who had made most of the shapes dropped by regularly to see the progress and find their special pieces.

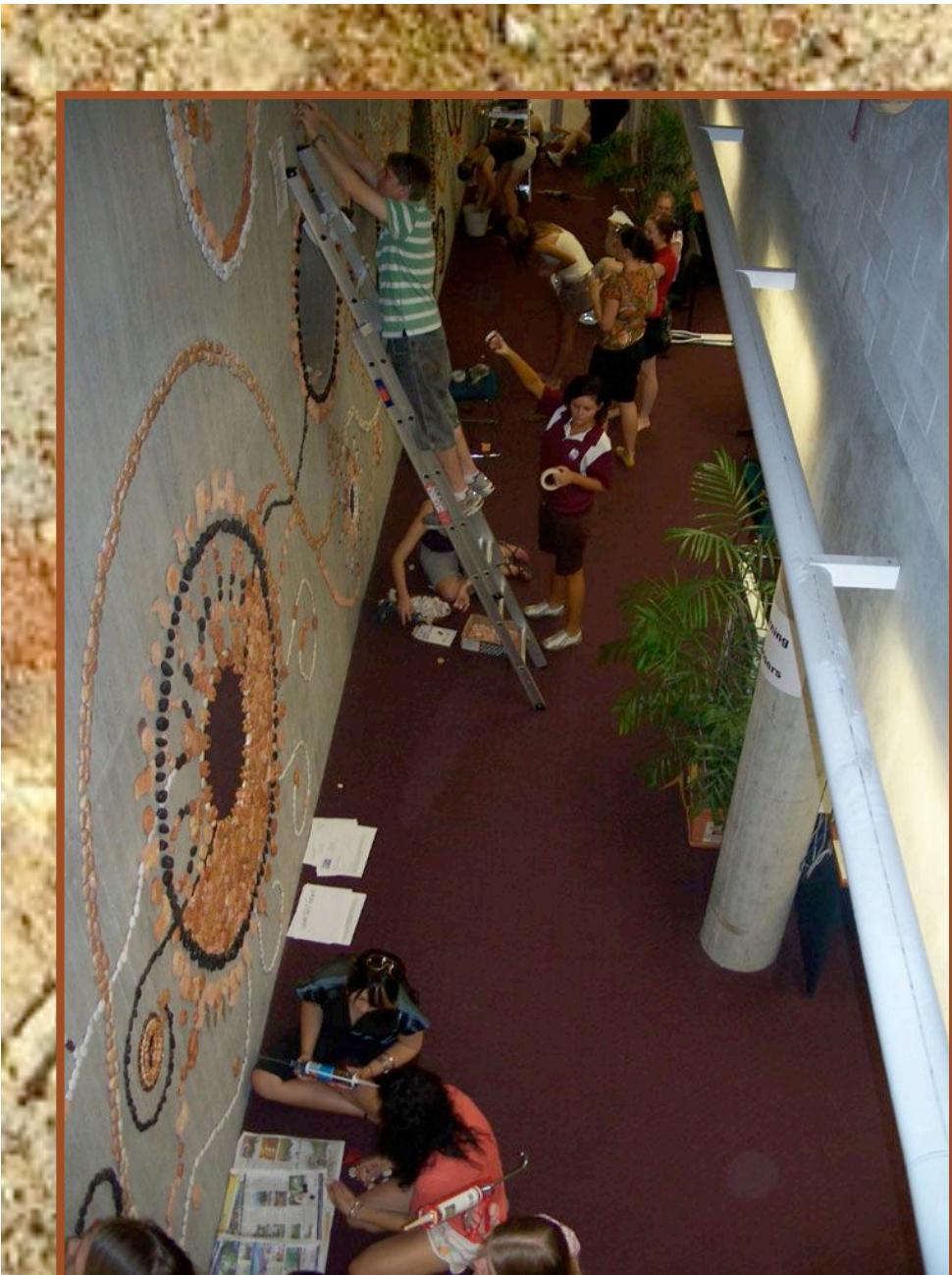
The word soon spread to come and see the Learning Circles.



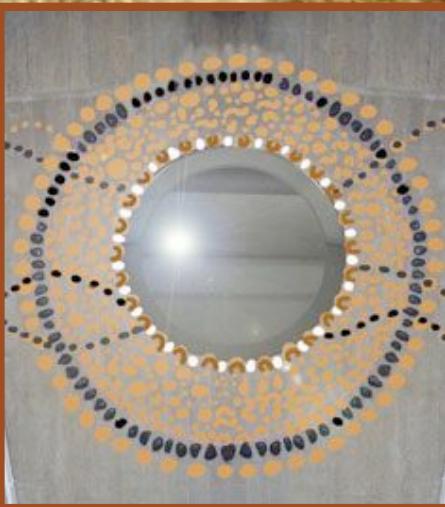
Post-it notes from project manager helped with final logistics and design unity.



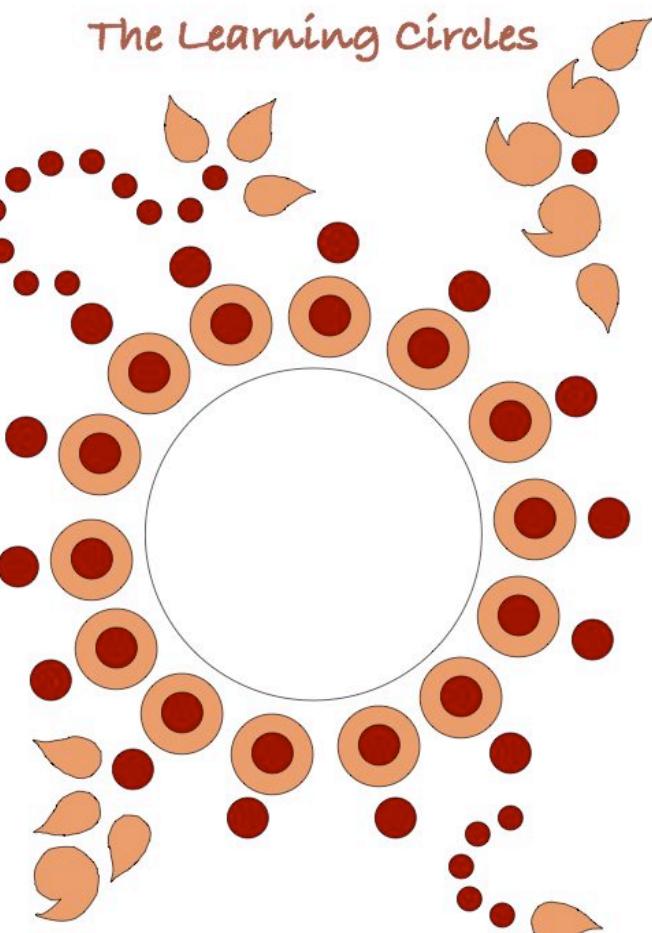








Initial  
Photoshop  
drafts were in  
some cases  
very close to  
the final  
designs.



As a privately commissioned work,  
the installation would exceed \$25 000  
for design concept, materials and  
labour.





**It was a truly collaborative venture by many faiths and nationalities ... studying here in the Australian tropics.**

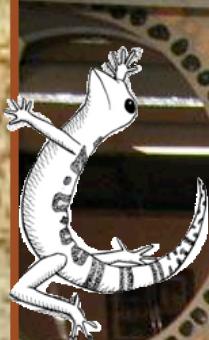
The large windows offered some ZEN moments.





**Six, weekly 3 hr sessions of large group activity completed most of the installation.**





Our final whole group session at the installation site was abuzz with satisfaction.





**The final outcome sees a 24m x 4m artwork installed at the University on a shoestring budget.**

**The project embodies a sense of belonging, networking, volunteering ... and of course a great deal of hard work.**





Some close-ups of the completed work, interspersed with ideas for research.



**The main purpose of *The Learning Circles* was never merely to decorate the library space although this was a simultaneous benefit.**

**The main aim was to combine a welcoming social experience for new first year students, through an enjoyable, inclusive art project.**

**O- week saw the majority of the actual art making activity.**





The literature and JCU First Year Experience Rationale refer to four elements for successful first year transition to university...

- **sense of purpose**
- **student engagement**
- **building resilience**
- **quality teaching**



It was never assumed that making a clay mandala or two would, in itself be a transformative first year retention strategy ..... but every little bit helps!

From anecdotal accounts, however it appears that participation in the 2008 Learning Circles provided first year students with a unique experience (and possibly an Australian University first) for enhancing early engagement.

More important than any art work, might be the perception that as first year students they do belong to the University community, with tangible and permanent evidence of their input.



The process of making a few small clay mandalas while chatting together in O-week and early classes, clearly facilitated ice-breaker conversations.

Many students have described that these enjoyable clay moments fostered an early sense of being part of this place, and triggered some lasting friendships and study networks.

It is this aspect of the first year student experience which will be our research focus.



**A qualitative research project will be undertaken in 2010 by Hanley, Bartlett and Ashton which examines student perceptions and narratives using e-survey, collective memory work and multiple case study methods.**

**By then, many students from the target group will be in the final year of their 3 year degree ... and some will have mentored new first years themselves.**





The main question which the research will ask is  
In what ways did participating in the Learning  
Circles ceramic project contribute to your sense  
of belonging as a first year student at JCU?

The JCU 2006  
and 2008 First  
Year Experience  
Questionnaires  
will also be  
examined.



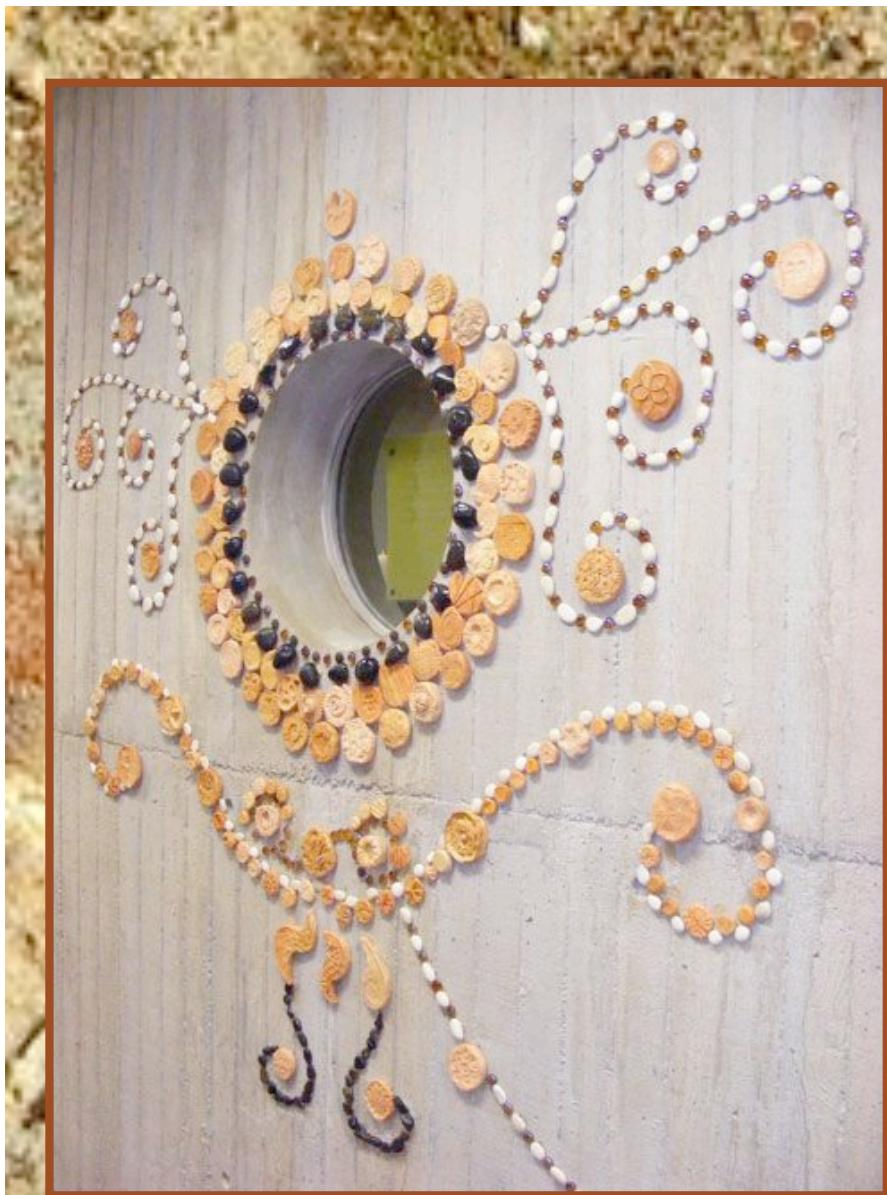


**Additional data and narratives will be sought from a broader range of University personnel (mentors, teaching staff, learning advisers, senior executive and general student population).**



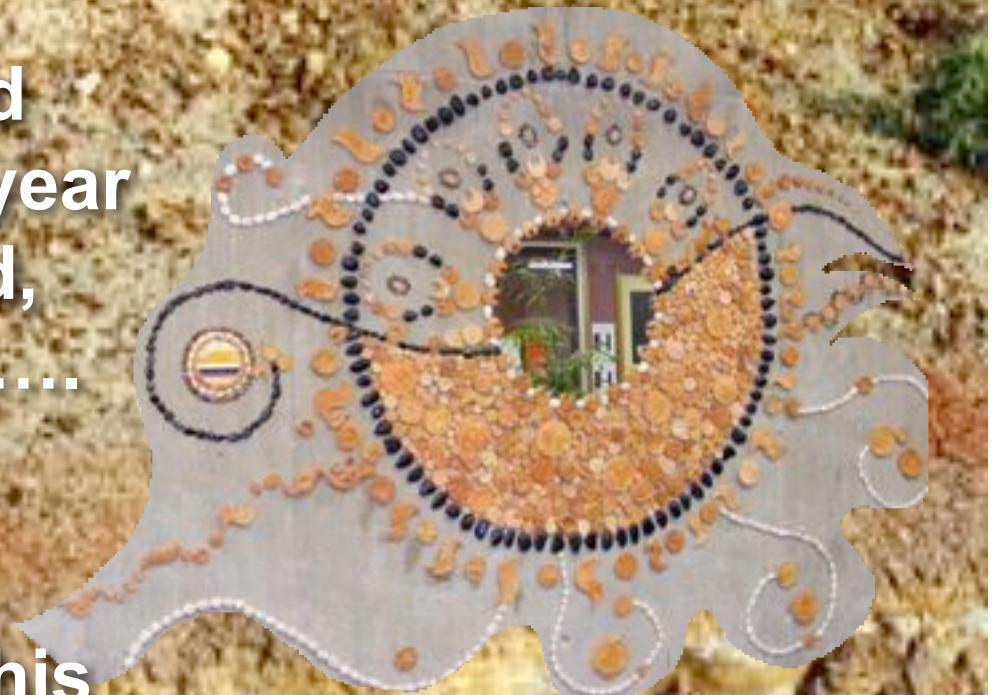
We also hope to canvas the wider University community's views about larger scale art projects as conduits for student engagement.





**Beyond the research and  
long after the 2008 first year  
students have graduated,  
the artwork will remain ....  
a tangible record of the  
human urge to say**

**“I was here and part of this  
special tropical learning  
place”.**







Special thanks to the JCU student mentors (represented today by Zuni Wild-Drake), the first year student community of 2008, and all who contributed to the Learning Circles.







*The Learning Circles project was formally  
handed over  
to  
Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor  
Prof. Andrew Vann in 2008 ...  
the 40th anniversary  
of the library.*



# Music acknowledgements



Les Miserables  
Schonberg & Boublil  
Winter Waltz  
Kitaro  
Earth Healer  
Medwyn Goodall  
Love Actually  
Craig Armstrong  
Embrace  
Govi

The artists respectfully acknowledge Eddie Koiki Mabo, after whom the JCU Townsville Library was renamed in 2008.

Hopefully this inspirational man would welcome the collaborative artwork to the building, which he loved as a special place of learning, for his generation and for those to come.

