

Transformative learning in first year Indigenous Australian studies: Posing problems, asking questions and achieving change.

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Indigenous Australian studies necessarily addresses emotionally-difficult topics related to race, history, colonialism and our identities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As educators in this discipline, it is important for us to find teaching and learning approaches which make space for these topics to be accessed, understood, discussed and engaged with in meaningful ways. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), because of its emphasis on dialogic learning, is a pedagogical tool used in many Indigenous Australian studies classrooms in preference to other methods. In this presentation we want to explore the potential of PBL to allow personal and emotional responses to become accessible, dialogic and discursive, so that the resulting new awareness translates into practical action and change. We will focus on a practice-based initiative which involves the implementation of PBL in a first year introductory course at The University of Queensland and provide practical guidance on the incorporation of PBL in curriculum development.

Description of the course

The first year course focused on in this nuts and bolts presentation is called “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Issues: Past, Present, Future” at The University of Queensland. It is a multidisciplinary course drawing extensively upon Indigenous Australian (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) history and culture to provide insight into contemporary Australian issues. As well as providing a series of lectures from an academic viewpoint, the course is supported by Problem-Based Learning (PBL) packages and draws upon the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from a diverse range of backgrounds. This provides students with a unique perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experience as well as the broader human experience in Australia. Students are expected to engage critically with key issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. The course aims to provide students with the necessary academic skills to establish a balanced understanding of the cross-cultural dimensions of the issues and perspectives relevant to Indigenous Australians. Teaching staff actively draw upon visiting scholars to give students ample opportunity to engage with the experiences of Indigenous People in contemporary Australian society and popular culture. The learning objectives of this first year course are quite explicit in terms of the critical engagement, dialogue and reflection expected of students:

1. Engage with knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and identity.
2. Understand the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and identity have been constructed throughout colonisation.
3. Understand the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are researching back, articulating their own histories, cultures and identities.
4. Engage in dialogue regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and how these issues fit in the contemporary contexts at individual and whole social movement levels.

5. Engage with introductory skills in critical analysis, and how these can be employed to reveal the power relations implicit in colonial discourse.
6. Engage in an introduction to conceptions of social healing and relational responsibility.

Typically this course has an enrolment number of approximately 120 first year students drawn from a wide variety of disciplines including arts, education, journalism and engineering and it is a popular course with incoming international exchange students. The course is also a compulsory introductory course for first year social work students at The University of Queensland. “Indigenous Australian Issues” is the core foundation course for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies major within the Bachelor of Arts at The University of Queensland and it delivers the core principles and understandings relevant to this discipline.

What the PBL package looks like

In its broadest sense, PBL can be defined as a “method of learning in which the learners first encounter a problem, followed by a systematic, student centred enquiry process” (Schwartz et al., 2001, p. 2). PBL as we know it today, was first implemented in health science and medical education curricula in Canada in the late 1960s (Schwartz et al., 2001, p. 2; Boud & Felletti 1997), and is commonly used in the course content of natural sciences (e.g., engineering, mathematics) and professional degrees (e.g., business, law, social work, education). The PBL approach developed out of research that demonstrates that adult learners understand material better and retain it for longer if they engage with it actively. Described by Savin-Baden as a “student centred” approach to pedagogy, she explains that PBL offers students opportunities to “explore a wide range of information, to link the learning with their own needs as learners and to develop independence in enquiry” (2000, p. 3).

Relationships and dialogue are key features of PBL. Students work in small groups with a lecturer or a tutor who acts as a facilitator of discussions and learning (Schwartz et al., 2001, p. 2). In many ways PBL group work enables the class to build a “community” of learners, joined by a shared commitment and desire to “know”, which hooks maintains is essential to create a climate where openness, intellectual rigor and personal transformation can happen (hooks, 1994, p. 40). There are no “right” answers in PBL, rather this approach seeks to raise questions in order to allow students to deeply explore, discuss and reflect. In the Indigenous Australian studies classroom there are occasions where students generate questions that the lecturer cannot answer – this in turn begins another cycle of reflection-action-reflection as both student and teacher enter into a dialogue together to find what it is that needs to be learnt and to better understand what is problematic about a situation. We also feel that PBL is ideally suited to engaging with topics and issues in Indigenous Australian studies which may be challenging because it replicates what we understand about Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and ways of being in teaching and learning contexts.

The PBL package used in this course and discussed in this nuts and bolts session is titled “Re/presenting Hindmarsh Island: Aboriginal Women’s Business”. The PBL package focuses on the history and ongoing academic and public debates around Aboriginal women’s traditional ownership of Hindmarsh Island in South Australia and seeks to raise a number of questions about relationships to country, gender and knowledge, and the impact of colonisation and the continued silencing of Aboriginal voices in Australia today. On completion of this package students have:

1. described the Hindmarsh Island case;
2. examined the results of the recent High Court decision in relation to Hindmarsh Island, current status and the implications of the decision in relation to Native Title;
3. described aspects of women's role in Aboriginal culture that are relevant to an understanding of this case and women's relationship to land as a whole;
4. identified similarities and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches and perspectives presented in relation to the Hindmarsh Island affair;
5. considered the different discourses at play in the Hindmarsh Island affair and the way that these discourses work to silence and/or empower Aboriginal women;
6. adapted to a situation where they have primary responsibility for their own learning and the teaching staff act as facilitators rather than authorities;
7. demonstrated their acceptance of the responsibilities of collaborative learning.

How it is done

The PBL package is completed in two weeks across two individual classes. In the first class the students are first given an introduction to the learning material in the form of a handout about the historical background to the Hindmarsh Island case. The main stimulus material which follows is a short video excerpt of a journalist reporting on the "facts" of the case and questioning the legitimacy of Aboriginal women's claims to ownership. Students then form small groups of 4-6 people to begin to try to understand what they have seen and talk about the main issues raised in the learning material. By the end of the first class each small group is expected to develop research questions which will help them to consider the main issues. Once each group has framed the issues raised in their discussion as research questions, each group is asked to share their list of research questions with the entire class. The research questions are collated and each group is assigned one of these questions. Each group is then expected to explore their research question/s between PBL sessions. Students are encouraged to meet as a group outside of class to do this or to allocate each group member a specific task to bring back to class next week. In the second class, the learning stimulus material is revisited briefly. The groups then reform with each individual group member contributing the information they have researched over the past week to come to an understanding of the research question/s. The group then decides what information they would like to present back to the class on their research question/s. This information may be presented in any format (e.g. on an OHT, as a group performance); and may be presented by the entire group or a nominated spokesperson. Each group presents an exploration of their research question/s back to the class. The class works together to come to a series of main points which address the research question/s raised in this PBL as a whole, keeping in mind that more questions may actually be raised than answered. An important part about PBL is self-directed learning where the role of lecturers is to guide students through the PBL package – in this way becoming teachers and learners together.

Impact

Using interview and focus-group results, observational classroom data, lecturer reflections and assessed student work, this nuts and bolts presentation reports on the effectiveness of PBL to accommodate diversity through curriculum and achieve transformative learning for first year students in “Indigenous Australian Issues”. The course seeks to actively deconstruct historical and contemporary entanglements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and, in doing so, help build better working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Discussion in and around these issues necessarily involves talking about the violence of colonialism, the racism often inherent in white imaginings of Indigenous people, and the continued oppression of Indigenous people today. This is, as hooks (1994, 154) describes, “difficult material”. It moves away from that “cozy, good feeling” into the realms of awkward memory and knowing (McConaghy 2003, 11). Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can find themselves “exploring, experiencing and processing emotions, memories, and other aspects of themselves that were previously unknown” (Butterwick & Selman, 2003, 14). Savin-Baden aptly comments that “learning is about engaging different dimensions of ourselves in the learning process. Emotions and feelings are often the ones that are most neglected in learning” (2000, p. 55) and hooks, too, notes that the “restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place” (1994, 155). We will report on the dialogic nature of PBL provides an opportunity for students and lecturers to air and talk through the kinds of emotional and intellectual discomforts they are experiencing, and via this discursive exchange create the possibility to replace old ways of knowing and being with something new (Boler 2004, 129). One of the biggest impacts we will explore is the ways that PBL as a teaching and learning approach opens up the potential for students to ask difficult questions, engage emotionally and personally with intellectual material, through critical reflection develop a sense of empathy with Indigenous Australian peoples, and compels students towards action for change.

Audience participation

After describing the context of Indigenous Australian studies at The University of Queensland and providing some discussion of PBL as transformative learning, we will run a 15 minute workshop using the Hindmarsh Island PBL package as a condensed PBL session so that participants can experience and reflect on the transformative aspects of this teaching and learning approach. We will provide participants with the PBL package handout and show the short learning stimulus video clip. We will then ask participants to form small groups to generate research questions about the package. This will be followed by asking them to discuss what this might mean as a pedagogical approach for them as teachers. To conclude we will share our insights from our research with first year students in relation to this PBL package to demonstrate how it can achieve diversity through curriculum to lead to transformative learning.

Key questions

The key questions guiding the discussion:

How did you experience this PBL example as transformative learning?

How might the principles and processes of PBL be embedded and practically applied in the curriculum beyond Indigenous Australian studies in your own teaching and learning?

References

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