

Indigenising the unit Engaging in the Humanities

Cathy Cupitt

Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University

Abstract

This session outlines the process of Indigenising the first-year unit Engaging in the Humanities: the underlying philosophy, practical application, problems which arose, current solutions, and the outcomes to date. Through this presentation a number of important questions are considered such as what strategies can be used to develop staff in order to achieve a consistent quality of teaching in the area of Indigenous cultural competence, and how could current approaches to fostering Indigenous cultural competence be improved or outcomes more effectively achieved?

Indigenising the curriculum at Curtin University

Engaging in the Humanities 100 is a first year communication skills unit which is a core component of the new 'super BA' now available at Curtin University. It ran for the first time in 2010, and is designed to help students achieve success at university through a transitioning process (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, Nordstrom 2009) which: introduces academic assessment genres and the standards of achievement expected; develops a community of shared practice through exemplars, peer-review and feedback; encultures students into their discipline and its modes of discourse; and develops their cultural competence as communicators and ethical researchers.

One of the driving pedagogical issues underpinning the development of this unit was Curtin's commitment to Indigenise the curriculum, as outlined in Curtin's Reconciliation Action Plan 2008 and the Mooditj Katitjiny¹: Indigenising the Curriculum Project (Curtin's Indigenous Commitment 2009).

Curtin University of Technology's vision for reconciliation is to be a place of learning that respects Indigenous culture and diversity: a place where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come together to learn their chosen discipline contextualised within Indigenous culture and history. (Curtin's Reconciliation Action Plan 2008, 2)

This project to Indigenise the curriculum takes a whole-of-course approach, enabling students over the course of their degree to develop increasingly sophisticated intercultural communication skills as both practitioners in their field, and as members of the wider community. This strategy is outlined in the competencies matrix given below. As a first year unit, the goal set for Engaging in the Humanities is for students to achieve the first level of competence, which second and third year units can then build upon.

¹ Good learning.

	Knowledge	Affective domain	Skills
Cultural awareness (Indigenous)	Identify Demonstrate knowledge about the complexity and diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures, worldviews, knowledge's, identities and spiritual beliefs	Recognise Acknowledge that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are the first people of Australia	Perform Use Indigenous protocols, with particular reference to the protocols of the local traditional owners
Cultural Sensitivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring individual attitudes and values Critical engagement and analysis Developing generic skills and strategies 	Analyse Critically engage with Australian history and national identity in relation to Indigenous people, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The colonisation and ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous peoples' responses to this This significant contribution Indigenous people have made to the economic, social, cultural and political life of Australia Common stereotypes and misconceptions about Australian Indigenous people The legal and constitutional status of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous peoples' rights in international law 	Reflect Adopt self-reflective work practices taking into account personal cultural location in relation to Indigenous peoples, including, but not limited to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Personal cultural identity The culture of colonialism The culture of the academy The culture of their chosen profession 	Apply Implement ways of working that support Indigenous/Aboriginal terms of reference ¹
Cultural Competence (dynamic)	Synthesise Contextualise local and national Indigenous issues alongside international pan-Indigenous issues and globalisation	Realise Value the importance of life-long learning journeys in partnership with Indigenous people	Collaborate Work in culturally appropriate ways that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations for fairness, social justice and human rights

Mooditj Katitjiny: Indigenising the curriculum generic competencies matrix (Curtin's Indigenous Commitment 2009, 59)

The particular challenge was to incorporate an Indigenist approach which would enhance and support the transitional first-year learning experience for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as informed by best practice, in order to shape student engagement with learning (Krause and Coates 2008), and provide opportunities for students to develop the skills needed for academic success.

Recent research suggests that while students are primarily interested in enhancing employability when they attend university, they choose their discipline based on interest (Scutter et. al. 2011, 17). To ensure the unit engaged and maintained students' interest in their chosen discipline, we also faced the challenge of finding Indigenous material and approaches which were relevant across three schools within the Faculty of Humanities: the School of Design and Art; Media, Culture and Creative Arts; and Social Sciences and Asian Languages.

Mapping an Indigenous framework of study to Unit Learning Outcomes

The Indigenous framework of study developed for the unit was created in consultation with staff from Curtin's Centre for Aboriginal Studies, and focused on developing the students' cultural competence through three drivers: "building knowledge, nurturing values change and developing skills" (Ranzijn, McConnochie and Nolan ctd. in Curtin's Indigenous Commitment 2009, 58).

In a similar manner to previous initiatives (Williamson and Dalal 2007, 52), these drivers were mapped to the unit's overall Learning Outcomes.

For instance, outcome four was mapped as follows.

Upon successful completion of the unit students are able to:

4. Articulate understandings of the language, concepts and practices of the learning context, and of themselves as students.

Within the Indigenist framework, this became:

Students will be able to articulate understandings of:

- the diversity of Indigenous cultures, and the importance of self-naming and self-identity;
- Indigenous protocols and terms of reference, and relevant industry codes of practice;
- the historical constructions of (colonial) authority and the importance of bringing that understanding to the analysis of texts, genres, modes of transmission, and the diversity of lived experiences; and
- the importance of questioning their own understandings of society and sense of identity.

In the classroom and online learning spaces

The mapped outcomes served as a guide when looking for ways to integrate Indigenous perspectives, examples and protocols into activities designed to develop students' communication skills. The goal was to embed content and activities which developed cultural competencies across many activities within the unit, rather than isolating them into a single tutorial or lecture.

For example, specific activities which develop skills related to outcome four include:

- requiring students to give an Acknowledgement of Country in the oral presentation assessment
- analysing media representations of Indigenous peoples in class from an anti-colonial perspective
- requiring students to find, bring to class and analyse their industry's code of practice on Indigenous issues
- assignment topics which allow students to explore aspects of Indigenous cultures and/or media representations from different perspectives, and then reflect on the that process.

Outcomes and questions

A key activity in developing cultural competence related to outcome four is the use of the Acknowledgement of Country protocol, which has become a standard element of public speaking in Australia. Through using the protocol in their oral presentations, students begin to develop a basic understanding of the cultural norms of respectfully engaging with Indigenous cultures. A protocol like the Acknowledgement of Country is most effective if it is adapted to the audience – for instance, by learning the preferred name of the local Indigenous community. Being able to understand the purpose of a protocol and then adapt it

appropriately is not only an integral part of cultural competence, but a practical workplace skill.

In addition, the Acknowledgement of Country generates engaged discussion within tutorials, and in most cases has a positive outcome in terms of raised cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Student comments:

Having [...] thought about what you said, I am thankful for the opportunity, as my chosen career path will involve some form of formal speaking. (OUA SP4, 2010)

This unit provided me with new perspectives on culture, and made me aware of my own privileged position within our society. (Sem 1, 2010)

Questions arising from this experience

Throughout this process, several issues have arisen, all of them well documented by others undertaking the process of Indigenising the curriculum. First, and most importantly, is the issue of acknowledging/reconciling the “role that Western education plays in supporting colonial goals” (Nakata 2006, 268) with the introduction of anti-colonial and Indigenist approaches to learning. The problems related to this are wide-ranging. For instance, as Williamson and Dalal (2007) point out, the choice to use a unit’s Learning Outcomes (an established element of Western education) as the framework for finding ways in which to link Indigenist approaches to learning is a useful place to start, but intrinsically limits how knowledge can be reframed. There is also considerable debate about what Indigenous knowledge it is appropriate to include within the academy’s curriculum, and how to include it, without becoming appropriative (see for instance Nakata 2006; McLaughlin and Whatman 2007; Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008).

Second, while staff were generally interested in including Indigenous material in the classroom, many were teaching these protocols and Indigenous perspectives for the first time in this unit, and felt some apprehension about their own capabilities, and how to deal with student resistance. Literature on Indigenising the curriculum commonly identifies similar fears and resistances (see for instance O’Dowd’s interesting work on the “ethical positioning” of students (2010, 30)). To compound this, many of our tutors are sessional staff, and extra care must be taken not to overly burden them with preparatory work, given equity issues related to their pay rates and workloads. How then do we achieve a consistent quality of teaching in the area of Indigenous cultural competence, given limited budget, time constraints and opportunities for training?

Third, while this initial approach is proving successful in initiating student development of cultural competence, it is only a beginning. Ongoing development is made difficult, however, by limited availability of resources, the lack of exemplars of best practice, and the continuing silence surrounding Indigenous issues in general. How then do we move forward in fostering Indigenous cultural competence within units which have already taken these first steps?

The format of this session

A fifteen-minute overview will be given of the Indigenisation of the unit Engaging in the Humanities, tracing the process from development of the pedagogical framework to practical application and classroom activities. Examples of student work, and student feedback given through Curtin’s eVALUate process, will be included.

The presentation will end with two questions raised as ongoing issues: What strategies can be used to develop staff in order to achieve a consistent quality of teaching in the area of Indigenous cultural competence? How could current approaches to fostering Indigenous cultural competence be improved within this or similar units?

A discussion forum will follow the overview, in which the audience is invited to share their own experiences relating to these two questions, and raise their own questions about how to successfully Indigenise the curriculum at the unit level, and the impacts this approach has on the first-year experience.

References

- Brinkworth, Russell, Ben McCann, Carol Matthews, Karin Nordstrom. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: Student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education* 58(2):157–173. DOI 10.1007/s10734-008-9188-3.
- Curtin's Indigenous commitment: Consolidated plans, policies and procedures.* (2009). Bentley: Curtin University of Technology.
- Curtin's reconciliation action plan 2008: A vision and a process.* (2008). Bentley: Curtin University of Technology.
- Kincheloe, Joe L. and Shirley R. Steinberg. (2008). Indigenous knowledges in education: Complexities, dangers, and profound benefits. In Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, eds. *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. 135-156.
- Krause, Kerri-Lee and Hamish Coates. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33(5):493-505.
- McLaughlin, Juliana M. and Sue L. Whatman. (2007). Embedding Indigenous perspectives in university teaching and learning: Lessons learnt and possibilities of reforming / decolonising curriculum. In *Proceedings 4th International Conference on Indigenous Education: Asia/Pacific*, 19-22 July, Vancouver, Canada.
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/10350/>
- Nakata, Martin. (2006). Australian Indigenous studies: A question of discipline. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 17(3): 265-275.
- O'Dowd, Mary. 2010. 'Ethical positioning': A strategy in overcoming resistance and fostering engagement in teaching Aboriginal history as a compulsory subject to pre-service primary education students. *Education in Rural Australia* 20(1): 29-41.
- Oxenham, Darlene. (1999). 'Aboriginal terms of reference': The concept at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. Discussion Paper 27. Bentley: Curtin Indigenous Research Centre, Curtin University of Technology.
- Scutter, Sheila, Edward Palmer, Ann Luzecky, Karen Burke da Silva, and Russell Brinkworth. (2011). What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first

year university? *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 2(1): 8–20. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i1.54

Williamson, Jane and Priya Dalal. (2007). Indigenising the curriculum or negotiating the tensions at the cultural interface? Embedding Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in a university curriculum. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 36 (Supplement): 51-58.