

# Introduction: Exploring the Scope of the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network

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The Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network was established in 2011 to develop a focused national network of scholars to engage in key discussions about teaching Indigenous Studies at tertiary level. Funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (2011–14), the Network combines leaders and early career academics and builds relationships between scholars in the discipline, identifies key issues and explores effective teaching and learning approaches. This introductory essay places this Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (AJIE)* in context by exploring the aims and outcomes of the Network along with the positioning of the Network team. It also examines key challenges for the Network and possible future directions.

■ **Keywords:** network, Indigenous Studies, teaching and learning

Indigenous Studies is an expanding discipline in universities across Australia (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). It is an important contribution to teaching both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students about Australia's colonial history and Australia's rich cultural heritage (Craven, 1999, pp. 23–25). It is a contested field of study devoted to preparing graduates with a high degree of professional expertise to apply disciplinary knowledge in situations involving Indigenous Australians. Nakata (2006, p. 265) calls for 'disciplinary and scholarly issues within Indigenous Studies' to be 'interrogated and yet retain the necessary cohesion and solidarity so important to the Indigenous struggle'. While Martin Nakata had been developing a network of educators and researchers through the 'Indigenous Studies Indigenous Knowledge' conference series, in 2011 we successfully applied for Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Discipline Based Network funding to develop a focused national network of scholars to engage in key discussions about the disciplinary principles of Australian Indigenous Studies.

The Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network (hereafter the Network) was established by a small team of academics and is a collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous tertiary educators who are committed to improving their teaching and learning practices in Australian Indigenous Studies. The estab-

lishment of the Network was particularly timely because, as Phillips notes, Australian Indigenous Studies 'is in a crucial phase of development at present. It has begun to progress from being "about" Indigenous peoples to being centred on negotiating the complex terrain of anti-colonial enquiry' (Phillips, 2005, p. 1). Recent scholarship sees the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems as fundamental to not just the politics of such negotiations of complex terrains, but 'for' the education of all students (Nakata, 2007). Questions continue to be asked about the inadequacies of Western paradigms and non-Indigenous people in the portrayal of Indigenous ways of knowing (Bell, 1994; Cowlshaw, 1993; Langton, 1993; Mackinlay, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2004; Nakata, 2006) and the role and reinstatement of Indigenous peoples in the production, reproduction and dissemination of Indigenous Australian Studies (e.g., Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). How Indigenous Australian Studies is taught, who should teach it and for what purpose has also been discussed and debated by various scholars (Craven, 2012; Chalmers, 2005; Ma Rhea &

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Russell, 2012; Nakata et al., 2012). Overall, the Network has provided an important platform from which scholars can discuss these issues and strengthen teaching and learning processes within Australian Indigenous Studies.

This Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* is a collection of scholarly papers stemming from discussions occurring through the Network. Key issues raised in this Special Issue include: How do we define Indigenous Studies? Who are we teaching? What teaching and learning frameworks are most effective in Indigenous Studies? What is meant by embedding Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum? How can we transform students' understandings about Indigenous histories, cultures and peoples? This publication represents the progressive dialogue about a disciplined-based engagement with Indigenous Australian histories, cultures and experiences that is occurring in an ongoing basis in the Network.

## About Us and the Network Team

Prior to establishing this Network, Katelyn Barney had been working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a number of teaching and learning projects in Indigenous Studies, education and ethnomusicology as part of her role in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, The University of Queensland. She is a non-Indigenous woman born on Jagera and Turball country in Brisbane, Queensland. Kate's specific role in the Network has been to coordinate the activities of the Network, work closely with the Network team to develop the website, organise Network meetings and a National Workshop, write and prepare the final report, and develop practical resources for the website with the Network team. Cindy Shannon and Martin Nakata have provided overarching leadership of the Network and managed the performance of the Network. Cindy Shannon is a descendant of the Ngugi people from Moreton Bay, Queensland. She is Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Education), where she is responsible for leading the implementation of the Indigenous strategy and strengthening leadership within the University in relation to Indigenous education, as well as building links with the community. Martin Nakata is a Torres Strait Islander and Director of the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Unit at the University of New South Wales Australia. His research work focuses on higher education curriculum areas, the academic preparation of Indigenous students, and Indigenous knowledge and library services.

The Network team consists of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members and represents in many ways the call from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for non-Indigenous people to enter into meaningful dialogues with Indigenous people. Heidi Norman is a Senior Lecturer in Social and Political Change at

University of Technology, Sydney. Her family descend from the Gamilaroi nation in north western New South Wales. Sandy O'Sullivan is a Senior Researcher at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and a member of the Wiradjuri nation. Liz Mackinlay is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at The University of Queensland. She is a non-Indigenous woman who grew up on Watharung country in Western Victoria. Deborah Cheetham is Associate Dean of Indigenous Development, Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts, University of Melbourne and is a Yorta Yorta woman. The role of partners was to attend four Network meetings over 2012–2013 and participate in the development of the content for the website and the workshop in 2013. Four 'critical friends' joined the team and their role was to attend meetings, participate in discussions and give advice of the development of the Network: Susan Page is Director of Learning and Teaching at Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University and is an Aboriginal academic. Bronwyn Carlson is Senior Lecturer with the Indigenous Studies Unit at the University of Wollongong. She is a descendant of the Nukunu people of South Australia, but was born on and lives on Dharawal Country. Jon Willis is Director of Academic Programs in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, The University of Queensland. Eugenia Flynn is Centre Coordinator for the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts, The University of Melbourne, and is a Larrakiah and Tiwi woman from the Northern Territory.

## Network Goals and Activities

The Network seeks to engage scholarly understandings of historical and contemporary relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to progress curriculum forms that demand quality learning experiences for all tertiary students.

The goals of the Network are to:

- share and build models of good practice within the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies;
- share the outcomes of teaching and learning research within the discipline;
- explore and address national higher education priorities in teaching and learning Australian Indigenous Studies;
- build relationships between scholars within the broad field of Australian Indigenous Studies;
- build relationships with leading international Indigenous Studies scholars, including those in New Zealand and Canada;
- support the work of scholars within the discipline, including the development of early career researchers.

There is much ongoing discussion nationally about teaching and learning Indigenous Studies and the OLT funding has allowed us to engage in key discussions about



**FIGURE 1**  
(Colour online) Through the Net (Denise Proud, 2012).

Australian Indigenous Studies and bring together leaders and early career academics in Indigenous Studies. Four Network meetings were held in February 2012 (Brisbane), June 2012 (Sydney), January 2013 (Melbourne), and July 2013 (Sydney) to identify key issues for the discipline, build relationships between scholars within Indigenous Studies, share outcomes of teaching and learning research in Indigenous Studies, share information about teaching and learning approaches and course content in Indigenous Studies, develop the Network website, and prepare papers for this Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* (AJIE). Alongside the Network meeting in July 2013, a roundtable discussion between Network partners was presented at UTS to explore issues raised in Network discussions. National higher education priorities were also discussed including issues surrounding funding for Indigenous Studies courses, student numbers, how to market courses, standards and benchmarking. Other questions discussed at Network meetings included: What and for whom is Indigenous Studies for? What is our assumption about the learner? Where does Indigenous Studies sit in relation to other disciplines? Where does Indigenous Studies sit within university structures now and in the future? The Network meetings strengthened the collaboration between the universities and allowed for resources, materials, ideas for teaching and learning Indigenous Studies to be shared and discussed.

## Outcomes

### The Website

A website ([www.indigenoustudies.edu.au](http://www.indigenoustudies.edu.au)) is one of the key outcomes of the Network and was launched in 2013. The website is themed around a painting, 'Through the Net', by Brisbane-based Aboriginal artist Denise Proud (Figure 1).

The painting illustrates the dialogue and collaboration occurring in the Network. The circles are meet-

ing places where discussions about teaching and learning occur. The two circles at the centre are the universities that established the Network: The University of Queensland (blue and gold) and The University of New South Wales (red and black). The three circles above are the partners: University of Technology Sydney (black and white), Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (red, black and yellow), and University of Melbourne (blue and white). The two other circles are the Network's initial critical friends: University of Wollongong (white and black) and Macquarie University (red and grey). The semi-circle shapes around each circle signify people sitting on the ground coming together in dialogue; and the copper background represents the earth, using copper as an element on which collaborations will be formed. The painting also represents the Network as a work in progress. Just as other universities join the Network, there is scope to add to this painting over time to reflect this. The curved, winding lines between the circles are Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning in Australian Indigenous Studies, while the straight white lines are non-Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. This highlights that there are many ways to approach teaching and learning in Australian Indigenous Studies. The lines are also pathways of communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, and it is important to note that, in the spirit of the Network, they are open. Knowledge can be shared back and forth, being shared between members of the Network. This represents Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators working together, valuing each other's knowledge, and travelling the journey together to improve teaching and learning in Australian Indigenous Studies.

The website includes:

- teaching and learning examples for tertiary educators in Indigenous Australian Studies;
- a facility for joining the Network;
- a facility for submitting example teaching and learning examples in tertiary Indigenous Australian Studies classrooms;
- information about the Network goals, people, and artwork;
- news and events in Indigenous Studies;
- information about useful publications, websites, research projects in Indigenous Studies;
- a list of universities offering courses in Australian Indigenous Studies.

The importance of using inclusive language on the website was emphasised by the Network partners, as well as the need to enable a comments section on the teaching and learning examples so that there could be dialogue between members about the resources. Examples continue to be added to the website.



**FIGURE 2**  
(Colour online) Initial Word Cloud: 'What is Indigenous Studies?', October 25, 2013.



**FIGURE 3**  
(Colour online) Word Cloud Activity in Progress: 'What is Indigenous Studies?' (Photo by Cathi Lawrence).

### The National Workshop

A workshop hosted by the Network was held on October 25, 2013, at The University of Queensland. Titled 'Pedagogy, Protocols, Place, and Positioning of Indigenous Studies', the aims of this workshop were to:

- share and present key foundational principles and models of good practice within the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies;
- share diverse views, expertise and knowledge of teaching Australian Indigenous Studies;
- share the outcomes of teaching and learning research within the discipline, including OLT projects and fellowships;
- build relationships between scholars within the broad disciplinary field of Australian Indigenous Studies and also international Indigenous Studies scholars

Forty delegates from 18 universities from across Australia attended the workshop, and two overseas institutions (Canterbury University and University of British Columbia) participated as respondents via internet video chat. The format of the day included a short Welcome to Country by Auntie Lilla Watson, followed by an overview of the day by Cindy Shannon and Martin Nakata. Short presentations by Network partners and members on each of the themes were then given and followed by international respondents via online and brief reflections on artwork linked with the themes. Workshop activities were also included to explore the key foundational principles of Indigenous Studies. As a starting point of the workshop, a word cloud of words from Network meeting discussions about 'What is Indigenous Studies?' was posted on the wall (Figure 2) and participants were asked if they could think any missing words, and then write one word on a post-it note and add it to the word cloud (Figure 3).

Throughout the day, participants added to the word cloud (Figure 3), and finally the revised word cloud incorporating words from participants was shared (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 4**  
(Colour online) Revised Word Cloud, October 25, 2013.

The final session involved Cindy Shannon returning to the themes and asking participants to share the key messages from each theme. Overall outcomes of the workshop were:

- strengthened relationships between scholars in discipline;
- development of key foundational principles of Australian Indigenous Studies.

The workshop provided a significant opportunity for scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies to meet, network and explore key questions relating to teaching and learning Australian Indigenous Studies. The format of the day was a success, with short 10-minute presentations, international reflections via Skype, some small group activities, and reflections on artworks linked with themes from Director of the Art Museum at The University of Queensland, Campbell Gray. Despite some technology issues, the reflections via Skype from international scholars provided valuable international input into the discussions around teaching Indigenous Studies globally. Connecting with these scholars has also provided



opportunities to collaborate further through panels at conferences and the development of future publications. More time for workshop activities, wrapping up the discussions of the day, and opportunities for all participants to contribute would have been useful. This was also reflected in the feedback from participants. There were a diverse range of views, practices and experiences explored by participants at the workshop. As had been discussed at previous Network meetings, there is a need to be clear on the separation between teaching Australian Indigenous Studies and teaching Indigenous students. Yet, as Nakata notes, the two 'are not entirely separable' (2006, p. 266). The revised word cloud demonstrated the key concepts in teaching and learning Australian Indigenous Studies. The key words that were added by numerous participants and that had not previously been included were: 'sovereignty', 'evolving', 'learning', and 'knowledge'. The value of a Network of scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies was expressed by many of the participants and there was much interest in continuing the Network. The possibility of a National Indigenous Studies Teaching and Learning Week was suggested as a possible step for the Network as a further opportunity for conversation among academics in Indigenous Studies. This will be explored further with Network partners and the OLT. The publication of this Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* is another outcome of the Network.

## The Challenges of the Network

An ongoing challenge faced by the Network has been finding agreement among the Network members about defining 'Indigenous Studies' as a discipline. Diverse perspectives were presented and debated at each of the Network meetings. Key features of Indigenous Studies that were shared and discussed at Network meetings included:

- privileging Indigenous voices and theories along with local perspectives and international Indigenous perspectives;
- examining historical and contemporary Indigenous histories and perspectives;
- exploring the traditional, the modern and the post-modern, encompassing history, politics and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives;
- involving multidisciplinary ideas about understanding identity;
- exploring Indigenous knowledge, experience and people and exploring how to untangle this and where it begins and ends;
- contesting Indigenous knowledge and contesting students' assumptions to socially and politically transform student's understandings;
- bringing Indigenous experts into the classroom;
- being critical by examining post-colonial theories and Critical Whiteness Studies, being scholarly rather than spiritual;
- emphasising the local and specific over pan-Aboriginal and concepts of place, time as a process, and diversity.

Certainly, Indigenous Studies can cover all of these areas, but the team had difficulty coming to agreement on a short defining statement about Indigenous Studies. As Carlson et al. note in this volume, the issues of definition and terminology become even more complex when Indigenous Studies courses have a global focus. In connection with definitions of Indigenous Studies, the Network partners also explored *who* Indigenous Studies is for. Certainly, there can be multiple groups of students undertaking Indigenous Studies, including non-Indigenous Australian students undertaking a major, minor or elective in Indigenous Studies, Indigenous students 'who are often a minority in lecture rooms', and significant numbers of international students (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 122). These cohorts vary across universities and courses. Another challenge within the Network has been developing teaching and learning examples for the website. While some resources have been prepared in consultation with Network members for the website, further teaching and learning examples in Indigenous Studies classrooms need to be developed for inclusion on the website. Further examples will be added to the site as the Network continues to develop and we encourage readers to join the Network and submit their own examples of classroom practice in tertiary Indigenous Studies.

## The Papers in this Volume

The papers included in this publication bring together the research of a community of tertiary educators working in the field of Indigenous Studies. Formal papers and a shorter conversation piece are included as a reflection of the dialogic nature of the Network. An important aspect of the articles in this volume relates to the use of terminology. There are terms which are used interchangeably to express the same concepts, ideas or contexts. 'Australian Indigenous Studies', 'Indigenous Studies', 'Aboriginal Studies' and 'Indigenous Australian Studies' are used by different authors to refer to a contested field of study devoted to preparing graduates with a high degree of professional expertise to apply disciplinary knowledge in situations involving Indigenous Australians. Overall, the papers in this Special Issue aim to foster dialogue and debate among researchers engaging in teaching and learning Indigenous Australian Studies.

## Conclusion

There are now over 100 members of the Network and members continue to join. The conversations we are currently having within the Network are only just the

beginning and we believe it is important to make the Network a space for collaboration, sharing and communication. Continuing to have the opportunity for people in the field of Indigenous Studies to get together and share research and practice is vital. The Network provides a space for dialogue that is central to strengthening teaching and learning processes within Australian Indigenous Studies. The Network is also committed to fostering the development of early career academics in Indigenous Studies, as well as supporting our current researchers. The value of the Network has been expressed by many and there is much interest in continuing the Network beyond the OLT funding. We also hope the Network can continue to build relationships and collaborate with international educators, particularly in Canada, New Zealand and United States, and link with other associations such as the Native American Indigenous Studies Association.

Communication with the partners, critical friends and members is central to strengthening links between universities that offer programs of Australian Indigenous Studies. At the centre of the Network is the goal of exploring how educators in Indigenous Studies can improve their teaching and learning, and this involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators working collaboratively together at the 'cultural interface' (see Nakata et al., this volume). Network discussions have highlighted that there are diverse ways that Indigenous Studies is taught at the universities. As Page notes in this volume, defining the concrete foundational knowledge in a discipline can improve our teaching and provide new insights into how our students experience learning and the Network will continue to consider and develop the core principles of Indigenous Studies. Overall, we hope that the Network can continue to engage educators in Australian Indigenous Studies and beyond to renew their curriculum and classroom practices and open up a new dialogue for 'new conversations' (Nakata, 2004) about the education 'for', 'on' and 'about' Indigenous Australians to ensure that all students have an understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures.

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