Exploring New Conceptualisations of Old Problems: Researching and Reorienting Teaching in Indigenous Studies to Transform Student Learning

Susan Page

Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Indigenous Studies can be both exciting and challenging for teachers and students. This article will examine how an existing learning theory can be harnessed to help teachers better understand these challenges and manage some frequently seen student behaviours. Much of the discussion in Indigenous Studies pedagogy to date has focused on the curriculum and what we should be teaching, with a growing body of literature, for example, related to the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges. However, there is less written about how students learn in Indigenous Studies. Drawing on the notion of the Cultural Interface and the 'zone of proximal development' to highlight the complexity of Indigenous Studies classrooms as a site of necessary struggle for students, the article considers possibilities for reconceptualising and reorienting teaching. The paper explores using the threshold concepts framework to gather evidence about how students learn or indeed don't learn, in Indigenous Studies. Threshold concepts are key ideas, critical to mastering discipline specific knowledge, which facilitate students' ability to think like a discipline experts.

❚ **Keywords:** Indigenous Studies, Indigenous education, threshold concepts

Indigenous Studies as an exciting, emerging discipline holds considerable promise for university educators interested in learning and teaching. Scholarship in the discipline is varied and broad, reflecting its multidisciplinary foundations. This general disciplinary scholarship is vital to developing the discipline, but more specific scholarship related to how and what we teach, as well as how our students learn, is equally important. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL; Boyer, 1990) is now firmly entrenched in the Australian Higher Education sector, underpinned by teaching excellence awards and targeted learning and teaching research funding at national and university level, as well as the recognition of teaching in institutional promotions processes. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning involves research and publishing on disciplinary teaching, a focus on excellence in practice derived from teaching informed by the broad scholarly literature on teaching and learning, and communication and dissemination of related work (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). As Shulman notes, a scholarship of teaching develops when 'our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work' (Shulman, 2000, p. 50). This apparent focus on

teaching, as opposed to learning, has drawn some criticism (Boshier & Huang, 2008); however, learning is a critical part of the SOTL equation and arguably the reason for any teaching (Ramsden & Moses, 1992).

There is now a vast body of literature related to teaching and student learning in higher education. From this literature, it is clear that there are a range of influences on quality learning, including the motivation of the student, the learning environment and the teacher (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010). For some years now there has been a focus on student approaches to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1997), with the notion of deep and surface learning now entrenched in the pedagogic lexicon. Other research emphasises the importance of the role of the teacher and the institution (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008), particularly in achieving successful outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds. There is also increasing understanding that diversity learning can have cognitive and intellectual benefits, particularly in relation to

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Susan Page, Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies, W3A/310 Macquarie University, North Ryde NSW 2109, Australia. Email: susan.page@mq.edu.au.

general outcomes such as critical thinking and evaluative skills, for all students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), which has implications for Indigenous Studies. Diversity experiences can include interaction with students from a range of cultural backgrounds, as well as undertaking study in 'ethnic or gender studies courses' (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 194). As Bruner (1985) so succinctly summarises: 'there are many ways to learn and many ways of encouraging different forms of learning' (p. 5). Much of this research is done outside of the context of the disciplines. There is, however, a growing body of research about student learning and teaching within disciplines.

The threshold concepts framework is one approach to understanding student learning that enables discipline specialists to undertake learning and teaching research in the context of their field of expertise. Threshold concepts are ideas that foster students' ability to think like a discipline expert and are deemed to be critical to learning, developing and mastery in a particular discipline, but are not always systematically taught (Meyer & Land, 2006). While there have been criticisms that the threshold concepts framework is ill-defined, rendering the approach less than useful for empirical research (Rowbottom, 2007), the notion has captured the attention of a growing diversity of discipline experts seeking to research their teaching. While the original focus of threshold concepts research was on the discipline of economics, application of the framework has grown to include diverse discipline areas, such as nanoscience and technology (Park & Light, 2009), design (Osmond & Turner, 2010), and analogue electronics (Harlow, Scott, Peter, & Cowie, 2011). The work of Cousin (2006a) on 'othering' has particular resonance for Indigenous Studies. The threshold concepts framework will be further elaborated later in the article.

Commensurate with an emerging and developing discipline area, there is a growing body of Australian and international literature related to the broad area of Indigenous Studies. Not surprisingly, one of the strongest themes in the Indigenous Studies literature is the idea of Indigenous Knowledges, perspectives or worldviews (Nakata, 2006; Thaman, 2003; Youngblood Henderson, 2005). A key argument in the literature relates to the contest between Indigenous and Western knowledges. This argument has grown out of the perceived marginalisation of Indigenous epistemology and overt dominance of Western approaches in higher education disciplines. Indigenous scholars, fluent in both Indigenous and Western ontology have sought not only to challenge the status quo but also to share, preserve and revitalise Indigenous perspectives. There is also a growing body of literature more specifically related to teaching in Indigenous Studies.

To date, the literature related to learning and teaching in Indigenous Studies has focused on three significant, overlapping areas: the role of aforementioned Indigenous Knowledges in the curriculum (Nakata, 2007; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012; Phillips, Phillips, Whatman,

& McLaughlin, 2007; Sefa Dei, 2008; Thaman, 2003), reflections on individual teaching practice (Gair, 2007; McGregor, 2005; Morgan & Golding, 2010), and Indigenous pedagogies (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Grande, 2008; Lambe, 2003). Although not the focus of this article, there is now, in addition, a significant body of literature related to Indigenous students' participation, access and achievement in higher education (e.g., Hossain, Gorman, Williams-Mozley, & Garvey, 2008; Sonn, Bishop, & Humphries, 2000; Trudgett, 2009). While this literature enriches and expands the discipline, there are few published research studies focusing on student learning in Indigenous Studies in university settings. Interesting work is beginning to emerge (e.g., Mackinlay & Barney, 2010) and some work touches on teacher insights about student learning (Hart & Moore, 2005), but there remains considerable scope for further systematic work to be done in this area. This is an under-theorised domain (Bierman & Townsend-Cross, 2008) where understanding how students learn and indeed experience teaching is vital in order to create stimulating and inspiring learning environments on which we can base our practice and curriculum development (Boshier & Huang, 2008).

This article outlines one avenue for exploring how we might illuminate students' experiences of learning in Indigenous Studies through empirical research, using the threshold concepts framework. The first part of the article will outline some of the background to Indigenous Studies teaching, including exploring the complexity of Indigenous Studies classrooms using the frame of the cultural interface, and highlighting some common, but vexing student behaviours. The intention here is to make a case for learner focused research in Indigenous Studies. The second part of the article will outline the threshold concepts framework that I propose to apply in a forthcoming qualitative research project, focusing on interviews with teachers and students, to examine student learning in the context of first year Indigenous Studies. Finally, the article will offer suggestions for reconsidering some common issues identified in Indigenous Studies teaching and learning. In this article, the term 'Indigenous' refers to Australians who are of self-declared Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background; while 'non-Indigenous' refers to all other Australians.

Indigenous Studies
The Case for Teaching Indigenous Studies: A Reminder

It has been 25 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody exposed a need for better education of non-Indigenous people in relation to Indigenous Australian history and culture. The report made clear that not only is history important 'because what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people; it is little known to non-Aboriginal people' (Johnston, 1991), but

that education of non-Indigenous people across a range of professions was vital to prevent the dereliction of care so evident during the Commission hearings. This call for better education of non-Indigenous people in relation to Indigenous Australia was recently echoed by the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012). Among a range of recommendations, the Behrendt Review (2012) pointed to an ongoing need to embed Indigenous perspectives into curriculum and graduate outcomes, considering it:

> *imperative that graduates across a range of faculties are exposed to and build their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary issues and perspectives. Such knowledge will help to equip them as professionals to better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations with whom they will be doing business and to whom they will be providing services. (p. 94)*

Despite some considerable gains, particularly in the professions, these entreaties to action remain vital but partially fulfilled recommendations, and therefore continue to be an important but yet to be fully realised, national goal.

There are two, intertwined, crucial reasons why this goal remains important. First, because Indigenous health and socioeconomic status, despite some gains, still lag behind that of non-Indigenous Australians; and second, because the work to be done to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians will require collaboration with non-Indigenous people. Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a small proportion of the population — 2.5% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) — it is likely that non-Indigenous people will continue to dominate the workforce interacting with and making decisions that impact upon Indigenous Australians. There is, then, a critical role for universities generally and Indigenous Studies programs more specifically, to play in educating this potential workforce, recognising that the majority of students undertaking Indigenous Studies programs are non-Indigenous. Students who undertake university studies will become the policy-makers, the professionals and decision-makers of the future. Too much of our current policy directed to Indigenous advancement is predicated on assumptions about race that serve to entrench rather than ameliorate disadvantage (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2012). Arguably, their learning at university will shape the future of Australia in both small and large ways. As we continue to seek remedy for the disparity in outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, more than 200 years post colonisation, our university graduates will need to develop deeper understandings of our complex colonial legacy (Moreton-Robinson, 2009) than their predecessors. Vitally, this will require thoughtful, reflective and evidence-based curriculum and pedagogical practice.

Many of the professional degree programs at university level, such as medicine, the allied health disciplines, education and law, have mandated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning outcomes (e.g., Phillips, 2004). In medicine and nursing, for example, the external authorities who authorise graduates to practise in the field expect students to have undertaken specific learning related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. For learners outside of the professions, an Indigenous Studies unit of study, however, might be the only opportunity many university learners will have to engage with and learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and contemporary experiences. As well as offering mandated curriculum, most Australian universities offer students an opportunity to undertake Indigenous Studies in some form. There is a range of ways this is done, with a number of institutions offering full majors in Indigenous Studies (e.g., Macquarie University), while others offer individual stand-alone units of study. Given the potential impact this could have in terms of a non-Indigenous workforce, it is an opportunity Indigenous teachers particularly value (Asmar & Page, 2009). In summary, there are currently four common ways that university students learn about Indigenous perspectives:

- enrolment in an Indigenous Studies unit offered by the Indigenous Studies department;
- mandatory Indigenous curriculum embedded in core units (e.g., Medicine, Nursing or Education);
- elective Indigenous-focused units delivered by discipline areas other than Indigenous Studies (e.g., Law or History);
- units where the individual teacher has an interest in Indigenous perspectives and includes a weekly topic and possibly an assessment option related to Indigenous people.

Complex Classrooms

Indigenous Studies is commonly taught from Indigenous centres — academic and/or student support units within institutions, often with a concentration of Indigenous staff —and is taught increasingly by Indigenous Australian teachers, with students being mostly non-Indigenous Australians from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. A significant issue for the discipline of Indigenous Studies, given the common combination of Indigenous teacher and non-Indigenous students is that of culture. Although not specific to Indigenous Studies, the twin dilemmas of student resistance and teacher stress (Asmar & Page, 2009) are heightened in a field overlaid with race and contextualised in a nation where ethnic tension can spontaneously erupt from a veneer of calm. It is therefore worthwhile considering how individual and collective notions of culture contribute to the context of what are fundamentally cross-cultural classrooms. Nakata's (2007) notion of the cultural

interface offers a useful framework within which to consider the complexity of the Indigenous classroom. The cultural interface is the contested space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems:

> *histories, politics, economics, multiple and interconnected discourses, social practices and knowledge technologies which condition how we all come to look at the world, how we come to know and understand our changing realities in the everyday and how and what knowledge we operationalise in our daily lives. (Nakata, 2007, p. 9)*

Others (Brown, 2010; Dillon, 2007) have drawn on the theoretical conceptualisation of cultural interrelatedness, inherent in Nakata's (2007) notion of the cultural interface, to acknowledge the complexity of our classrooms and our teaching spaces. The framework is a worthwhile one in which to consider our (often) cross-cultural teaching and learning situations. The complexity of our classrooms can, however, be unpacked further, by looking more closely at both teachers and students, to give a more nuanced and complete picture so that the context, when thinking about both learning and teaching, is clearer.

Teachers

Each of the participants brings to the classroom a variety of epistemological and ontological views. According to Brookfield (1998), educators view their teaching through four lenses. These include our own biographies as learners, learners' perspectives of our teaching, our colleagues' influences, and the understandings developed through reading of the research literature. The first three of these are particularly critical to understanding the particular context of Indigenous Studies classrooms. Although Indigenous teachers' learner biographies are likely to diverge significantly, it is also likely many will have had negative educational experiences related to their Indigeneity, given the prevalence of prejudice and racism in the broader society (Paradies, 2005). Some Indigenous teachers will also have experienced prejudice or racism in the classroom. There is clear evidence that Indigenous academics both in Australia and overseas experience the emotional labour associated with teaching largely non-Indigenous students (Asmar & Page, 2009, Harlow, 2003). Equally though, Indigenous teachers are driven by the educative possibilities inherent in the teaching of non-Indigenous students and derive satisfaction from doing this work (Asmar & Page, 2009). For Indigenous teachers, a particular concern for these largely non-Indigenous students is 'how they might come to understand the depth and complexity of the challenges Indigenous people confront in trying to pursue their goals and how students might think about the effects of their own practices, as they move into professions' (Nakata et al., 2012, pp. 126–127). Teachers also bring their discipline experiences to the classroom, and for an overtly multidisciplinary field this adds further complexity. The expe-

riences of a group of academics in trying to define the key concepts in Indigenous Studies as part of the the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network underline this complexity (http://www.indigenousstudies.edu.au/). Cultural background then, of both teachers and students, is an important part of the context of an Indigenous Studies classroom.

Students

Students also bring their own suite of complexities to the classroom. Students will have a variety of learning styles; some will have come to the classroom with the significant life experience of the mature aged student, others will have the more limited life experience of the recent school leaver. Most students who enrol in Indigenous Studies will have little experience with Indigenous Australians beyond that portrayed in the media (Morgan & Golding, 2010), although an increasing number of Australian school leavers will have undertaken some study in school. These students will also have grown up in an environment where racism continues to be an issue for many Indigenous Australians (Paradies & Cunningham, 2009). While undertaking their study in Indigenous Studies they will also be influenced by their peers. Given that the curriculum content can be challenging, students 'often experience Australian Indigenous Studies as a difficult and problematic area of study' (Hook, 2012, p. 112). Teachers often experience this as student resistance, contributing to the emotional labour noted earlier.

Experiences and Observations of Student Learning in Indigenous Studies

As noted earlier, it is vital that those of us who are teaching Indigenous Studies make the best of our opportunities to foster critical thinking in our students, so that our graduates may think beyond the simple binaries of black and white and develop creative visions for our shared futures. Indigenous Studies can be both exciting and challenging for teachers and students. As previously indicated, Indigenous academics are motivated by teaching. Many Indigenous educators are driven not only by a commitment to the discipline, but also by hope that through teaching, students will have a better understanding of Indigenous peoples so that they will combat racism and work more effectively to enhance outcomes for Indigenous people (Asmar & Page, 2009; Nakata 2006). These are lofty ambitions and perhaps more than we should expect from students. Nevertheless, this is the reality for Indigenous teachers, as is the frustration that fewer students than we would like are recruited to these aims by the end of their study. My observation of students in Indigenous Studies classes is that many students struggle to move beyond simplified binary thinking and are often impeded by cognitive rigidly or what Nakata calls 'slippage into forms of thinking and critical analysis that are confined within dichotomies

between primitivism and modernity' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 121).

This kind of thinking can prevent students from seeing the more complex interrelationships inherent in the discipline, or for that matter recognising Indigenous agency. As educators then, our work is underpinned not only by hope but also faith. Hope that our students will have transformative learning experiences; and faith, as Mezirow (2003) suggests, that this learning 'transforms their problematic taken-for-granted frames of reference ... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally able to change' (p. 58). It is useful to describe in more detail some of the ways in which student performance falls short of teacher expectations.

Often teachers begin to notice discrepancies when the first assignment is received or students start to do class presentations. Written assessments are noted to be shallow and simplistic, with little evidence of the reflection (Boud, 2001) or higher order reasoning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) that might be expected to lead to transformative learning experiences. Class presentations, as another example, make terrific use of visual resources, but the learners are unable to grasp the admittedly complex links between historical and contemporary disadvantage, or see beyond that disadvantage to recognise the many hallmarks of success. Teachers note that some students rely on stereotypes such as the 'noble savage'. Anecdotally, educators lament that students are just regurgitating information garnered from lectures or, more simply, that students just 'don't get it'. These issues are not specific to Indigenous Studies, but teachers of Indigenous Studies are likely to recognise at least some of the student behaviours and the associated concerns raised here.

In fact, it is likely that teachers will have seen these issues in multiple cohorts of students and even tried various ways to address them: through adjustments to the curriculum, reworking of assessment or adjusting teaching (or all three) in an effort to remedy the problems and enhance student outcomes. As well as our students' writing and classroom interactions, some of the evidence we use to adapt our teaching comes from student evaluation. This is commonly mandated within our institutional and national quality frameworks and constitutes good practice. Valuable feedback on teaching can be gained from this type of regular evaluation. However, the evidence is limited to a focus on teaching, with learning implied as a proxy. There is a need for more specific evidence about *how* Indigenous Studies students learn — this is the kind of evidence that comes from research. As Brookfield suggests, understanding 'what is happening to people as they grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning constitutes educators' primary information. Without this information, it is hard to teach well' (1998, p. 199).

The constellation of issues identified here — regurgitation, perhaps even plagiarism, and lack of evident

critical thinking — may not arise because of our teaching or result from deficiencies in students' abilities or engagement. It may be possible to conceptualise both in ways that are more conducive to good teaching and consequently enhanced learning. The threshold concepts framework offers alternative ways of seeing these learner behaviours, which can inform inform pedagogy, curriculum development and subsequent learning.

The Threshold Concepts Framework

Over the past 10 years the threshold concepts framework has been embraced with some enthusiasm by both teachers and academic developers. The idea has been taken up in the established disciplines as well as the newer disciplines and 'seem indeed to be themselves a site of emergence, to be welcoming to those teaching in new, un- or undertheorised areas, to provide a forum for those thinking about teaching in new domains' (Parker, 2013, p. 962). The threshold concepts framework brings together two critical factors: first, the potential for transformation; and second, the acknowledgement of troublesomeness and struggle, through the conceptualisation of the liminal space. Of further interest is the idea of there being discipline-specific concepts; in particular, tacit ideas that teachers might not explicitly teach, which are critical to students' mastery of the discipline (Meyer & Land, 2006).

Defining Threshold Concepts

The threshold concepts (TC) framework was first introduced in the early 2000s and as such is a relatively recent development in the broad field of higher education learning and teaching scholarship. A threshold concept is 'akin to a portal opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking' (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 3). In its original conception it was suggested that a threshold concept has five defining characteristics. A threshold concept would most likely be *transformative*, leading to a significant change in a student's thinking; *bounded*, as each concept will have an end point beyond which new concepts must be learned; *integrative*, as the concept helps students to connect ideas in a discipline; and *irreversible*, in that once a concept is fully grasped it is usually impossible to go back to the original way of thinking. However, the concept is also often likely to involve *troublesome knowledge*, in that the concept involves tacit knowledge that is often not explicitly taught (Meyer & Land, 2006). These characteristics distinguished threshold concepts from more concrete foundational knowledge in a discipline; for example, learning a formula in mathematics or knowing a set of dates in history. More recently there have been two further characteristics added, namely *discursive* and *reconstitutive* (Land, 2011, as cited in Barradell, 2013). Examples of identified threshold concepts include: confidence to challenge in the discipline of design (Osmond & Turner, 2010); and the notion of voice in higher degree research

(Kylie & Whisker, 2009). Cognisance of threshold concepts in particular disciplines leads teachers to teach the relevant ideas more explicity, refocus curriculum, or reorient assessment of student learning. This might include using more illustrative examples and devoting more time to particular tasks when teaching Dynamic Resistance (Harlow, Scott, Peter, & Cowie, 2011), or developing a range of practice-based teaching in Social Work (Morgan, 2012).

Particularly relevant to teachers and students of Indigenous Studies is the notion of troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2008), which in many cases involves counterintuitive ideas. This difficult to grasp knowledge leads students to a 'liminal space' (Meyer & Land, 2006) where they may struggle before grasping fundamental ideas that help to understand and connect to other central ideas in the discipline. The liminal state is further described as a rite of passage, drawing parallels with ethnographic research on life stage rituals such as adolescence or funerary rites (Meyer & Land, 2005). This notion of liminal space emphasises the social nature of learning rather than the developmental approach to learning favoured by the considerable body of work in cognitive psychology (e.g., Piaget, 1972). In this liminal space, students will potentially grasp the new knowledge, integrating it into their thinking and understanding of the discipline, consequently transforming the learners' thinking. In some cases though, students will continue their study without grasping the vital threshold concept, resulting in limited, superficial knowledge of the discipline without genuine or transformative understanding. In Indigenous Studies the consequence is that a valuable opportunity for student learning is lost.

The Liminal Space

The significance of the liminal space is that the student is engaged in an attempt to master the concept rather than remaining unaware or choosing to reject the concept (Morgan, 2012). Cousin (2006b) suggests that students construct conditions of safety during this transition and as learners struggle with mastery, resulting in mimicry, regurgitation of course material and possibly plagiarism that may only be uncovered when assessable work is received. According to a TC framework, students resort to these behaviours because they are stuck, not necessarily because they are lazy, incompetent or disengaged (Cousin, 2006b). This has serious implications for how we perceive our students and also for how we might provide pedagogical scaffolding for learning.

It is my sense that it is in this space that many Indigenous Studies students struggle with the complex anticolonial frames that underpin the discipline. The shorthand used for this, as noted earlier, is that students just don't get it. In less charitable moments educators might attribute this to laziness or lack of engagement (too many students don't do the reading we set, for example).

However, it is possible that some of the learner issues identified earlier, such as over-simplified thinking and reliance on binaries, are the result of struggle in the liminal space, rather than disengagement or disaffection. If that is the case then teaching and curriculum can be altered to assist students to grasp the concepts and move more effectively through the conceptual portal, leading to truly transformative learning.

Parker (2013), for example, suggests that binaries may indeed be useful and can be harnessed to enrich our teaching and that it is the

> countertension that produces motion, in the arrow, and harmony, in the resonating string; it is the very action of trying to bring together opposites or contradictions that moves our and our students' thinking forward: imagination creates knowledge out of polarities, dichotomies, paradoxes . . . by pairing opposite arguments intellectual maturity is gained. (p. 967)

It may be that this dichotomous thinking becomes the beginning point of teaching to become a platform for learning rather than an inhibitor. To finish now though, I want to revisit our complex classroom and suggest a way we might connect up theory with practice to find new solutions to these old problems.

A Theoretical Bridge between Liminal Space and the Cultural Interface

One theoretical approach that might be useful when considering the liminal space and the associated 'negative' or apparently maladaptive strategies students employ such as mimicry or even plagiarism, is Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This zone is defined as the distance between a child's 'actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving' and the higher level of 'potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86, as cited in Wertsch & Tulviste, 1994). Put more simply, the ZPD is the difference or space between a learner's current knowledge and what they can understand with the assistance of a teacher or more capable peer (Harland, 2003). Although originally undertaken with children, Vygotsky's developmental psychology work — in particular, his notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) — has been persuasively applied with adult learners (see, e.g., Culligan, 2013; Harland, 2003). The renewed interest in the Vygotsky's work may be because the ZPD underlines the complex interrelationship between learning and instruction, lending primacy to neither teacher nor learner, but underlines the collaborative dynamic in learning. It is pertinent to consider how the ZPD might relate to threshold concepts, particularly the notion of liminal space as the site of students' struggle to understand and master Indigenous Studies discipline knowledge within the cultural interface of the classroom.

Reconceptualising the Complex Classroom

To suggest that our classrooms are complex is simultaneously obvious and simplistic. Some of the reasons for this complexity have already been outlined, and yet without drawing further conclusions, acknowledging the complexity does not necessarily lead to resolutions as to how to improve teaching or inspire student learning in this critical area. Some action or conceptual shift must follow, in order for change to occur. One alternative is to conceptualise our classrooms as places of multiple-layered and overlapping activity. The overarching activity is the cultural interface, which unpins the cross-cultural experience for both teacher and student. Additionally, during a semester of study, the learners may be in various stages of liminal spaces as they wrestle with the course material. The notion of the ZPD may act as a bridge between the liminal space and the cultural interface, making the cultural interface less like a chasm, where learners have little cultural understanding and for some, fail to genuinely gain it over the course of their study.

I will explore this further by adapting the notion of voice, identified as a threshold concept for higher degree research students (Kiley & Whisker, 2009) to demonstrate how a threshold concept might work in Indigenous Studies and in turn may be useful to teaching and learning. Students might begin their study with the reasonable assumption that they each have their own voice and further, a right to use it. In an Indigenous Studies context though — mindful of the cultural interface — the concept of voice and the question of who has the right to speak is complex (arguably, in other contexts as well). Questions are likely to arise that might be counter-intuitive or at the very least unsettling, particularly for non-Indigenous students. Questions such as whether individuals speaks only for themselves or on behalf of others, to what extent is culture represented when individuals speak, or what protocols exist around the use of voice, could lead to students struggling in the liminal space. Indigenous people, for example, are often considered to be speaking on behalf of their community or for all Indigenous people, particularly in non-Indigenous contexts, whereas non-Indigenous students are less likely to consider that their opinions represent all Australians. While not wishing to preempt what the Indigenous Studies discipline threshold concepts might be, it is likely in such a complex field there will be ideas that we don't explicitly teach, which contributes to students struggling to master the discipline.

Having acknowledged that students are in a liminal space then, Vygotsky's ZPD leads us to more actively work with students, either through facilitated teacher student contact or guided peer-led activities. This is not in order to unduly lead or 'spoon feed' learners but to acknowledge the struggle as part of the learning and develop curriculum which fosters transformative learning rather than mimicry

and regurgitation. The possibility then emerges to consider our classrooms as discipline communities where the teacher and the learner come together to co-create learning, rather than didactic spaces where instruction flows from the teacher to the student (Davies, 2006).

Discussion with colleagues suggests that in many cases Indigenous Studies teachers do this almost intuitively by setting up 'safe' classroom space. Better understanding of how this works, or indeed doesn't work, will be useful for the discipline as well as for teachers and students. For the moment, my suggestions for how to manage student struggle in the liminal space relate to a range of things we may already do — provide timely feedback, foster discussion in the classroom, and develop a third ear (Cousin, 2006b) — for what is not said. Where possible, provide guidance through peer learning opportunities and scaffolded material, and consider teaching of concepts as well as content. I plan to do further systematic work in this area, using a qualitative research design, with the aim of determining what the threshold concepts are in first year Indigenous Studies, working with teachers, but importantly, with students; as Cousin (2006b) notes, 'the first design principle, then, is to explore (ideally with students) what appear to be the threshold concepts in need of mastery' (p. 5). I expect this work will contribute to the growing pedagogical discussions emerging in Indigenous Studies.

Conclusion

Acknowledging and managing complexity requires carefully considered instruction based on evidence. This evidence will come from a range of sources, including our own experiences as teachers, as well as formal and informal feedback from our students, discussion with our community of scholars, and finally the research literature. In Indigenous Studies there is a need to grow this literature to include discipline specific empirical evidence about what works in our complex classrooms. The gap here is that there is a dearth of systematic evaluation of the student perspective. Reflection on the teaching is useful but it does not illuminate the student experience, and without meta-analysis is less likely to point to generalisable action. The literature speaks coherently about what we should teach — Indigenous Knowledges or the history of dispossession — and offers some useful insights into individual experiences of teaching and teacher interpretations of student learning. What both the threshold concepts framework and the ZPD emphasise is the interaction between teacher and learner. Better understanding the student experience of learning is in order to further hone our teaching. The TC framework particularly lends agency to both teachers and students. Applying the framework to research our teaching can provide new insights into how our students experience learning in our classrooms. For those of us teaching Indigenous Studies, identifying threshold concepts has the potential to inform how we might work with our students

so that they are able to more successfully negotiate the liminal space and ultimately to develop more sophisticated understandings in Indigenous Studies.

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About the Author

Associate Professor Susan Page is the Director of Learning and Teaching at Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. She is an Aboriginal academic whose research and publication focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of learning and academic work in higher education. Her current research projects investigate the quality of supervision for Indigenous Australian higher degree research students and student learning in Indigenous Studies.