

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:

Leticia Anderson,
E-mail: leticia.anderson@scu.edu.au

Crafting safer spaces for teaching about race and intersectionality in Australian Indigenous Studies

Leticia Anderson¹  and Lynette Riley²

¹School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales 2480, Australia and

²School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, New South Wales 2006, Australia

Abstract

The shift to massified higher education has resulted in surges in the recruitment of staff and students from more diverse backgrounds, without ensuring the necessary concomitant changes in institutional and pedagogical cultures. Providing a genuinely inclusive and ‘safer’ higher education experience in this context requires a paradigm shift in our approaches to learning and teaching in higher education. Creating safer spaces in classrooms is a necessary building block in the transformation and decolonisation of higher education cultures and the development of cultural competency for all staff and graduates. This paper outlines an approach to crafting safer spaces within the classroom, focusing on a case study of strategies for teaching and learning about race, racism and intersectionality employed by the authors in an undergraduate Indigenous Studies unit at an urban Australian university.

Introduction

There is great variation in the understandings of how ‘safe spaces’ in higher education are defined and understood, as well as lingering questions of whether the concept of ‘safe spaces’ is really that helpful at all to educators (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Hodkinson, 2015; Callan, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2016; Byron, 2017). In this paper, we explore some of the core concepts related to the notion of ‘safe spaces’ in higher education and set out a rationale for the need to craft safer spaces for teaching challenging topics such as race and intersectionality in the Australian context. We highlight successful strategies for crafting safer spaces in the classroom, based on a survey of the existing literature and reflections upon our own experiences teaching in an Indigenous Studies undergraduate unit of study at an urban Australian university. This article does not include direct research on student perspectives, but is intended as a case study considering how Indigenous pedagogical approaches can be deployed in order to support the crafting of ‘safer spaces’ within the classroom. The terminology of ‘crafting’, following Fraser and Voyageur (2007), is chosen to reflect the process of academic staff co-constructing ‘a culturally safe learning space through a process of collaborative conscientization’ (p. 158).

Higher education in Australia, as in many settler-colonial societies, was traditionally the preserve of men of white heritage from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Opportunities for participation for staff and students from a more diverse range of identities and backgrounds increased gradually from the early 20th century. It has only been through the process of transition to a ‘mass’ higher education system in recent decades, however, that explicit policies aimed at widening participation, driven by social as well as economic imperatives, have increased the inclusion of those from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, such as people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people of diverse genders and sexualities, people with diverse abilities and people from low socio-economic status households (James and Johnston, 2016; McCarthy, 2011). These ‘minoritised’ social groups, regardless of whether they are a demographic majority or minority, have historically been systematically excluded from power, denied access to resources and subjected to various forms of oppression (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017).

Despite the shift to massified higher education, universities have typically been slow to take up the work of ensuring staff and systems are responsive to the needs of changing cohorts. Increasingly, students *and* staff are from diverse backgrounds, yet in many respects, rather than modifying cultures and processes to be more inclusive, Australian universities have continued to operate from a foundation that reflects the colonial heritage of these elite institutions. The (often implicit) expectation is that diverse students and staff must adapt to existing institutional and educational cultures. Within such a context, diversity is often seen as a deficit, or has been constructed as such (Devlin, 2013; Schofield *et al.*, 2013; Liddle, 2016; Page *et al.*, 2017).

These factors have meant that higher education has often been experienced as a profoundly ‘unsafe’ space for students and staff from minoritised backgrounds. The explicit and ‘subtle’

discrimination they experience at the institutional, curriculum and individual levels can result in profound emotional harms and contribute to low success rates for students and high burnout rates for staff (National Tertiary Education Union, 2011; Schofield *et al.*, 2013; Page, 2014; Bond, 2014; James and Johnston, 2016; Liddle, 2016). In contrast, as one Indigenous student in a pre-tertiary program put it, ‘if it’s a safe place then you can concentrate on doing your best’ (Hall and Wilkes, 2015, p. 117). We therefore contend that crafting safer spaces is an essential task for educators in Australian universities, especially in critical disciplines such as Indigenous Studies. Page (2014) has highlighted that Indigenous Studies educators frequently intuitively work to create safe classroom spaces within which ‘the teacher and the learner come together to co-create learning’. As she observes, ‘better understanding of how this works, or indeed doesn’t work, will be useful for the discipline as well as for teachers and students’ (p. 27). We therefore set out our own approach to crafting safer spaces and reflect on how this has impacted upon our own and student experiences in this complex teaching environment.

What is a ‘safe space’?

When we refer to ‘safe spaces’, we mean spaces that afford concrete rather than symbolic safety from physical *and* psychological or emotional harm. We mean spaces that are actively constructed, rather than simply alluded to, and person-oriented rather than system-oriented. The concept of building ‘safer spaces’ can include the transformation of institutional cultures, as well as the creation of safety specifically within the classroom. In this article, we discuss the wellbeing and safety of both students and academic staff in the classroom, although most of the scholarship that we draw on focuses on the former as the experience of safety for academic staff within and without the classroom is still an emerging area of scholarship (Anderson *et al.*, 2019; Bond, 2014; Daniel, 2018). Whilst the creation of safer spaces in classrooms must ultimately be supported within a framework of wider institutional cultural and curriculum change, consideration of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper (see Liddle, 2016; Page *et al.*, 2017).

A ‘safe space’ does not always mean a ‘comfortable’ space. In fact, teaching Indigenous Studies in the Australian higher education system *requires* grappling with what Townsend-Cross (2018) has conceptualised as ‘difficult knowledge’, explored through ‘uncomfortable pedagogies’:

Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle, or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 50).

Australia is a settler-colonial society, and research and teaching about colonial history is still largely conducted in ways that ‘omit, exclude, and misrepresent Indigenous people’s knowledge, cultures, and issues’ (Riley *et al.*, 2013, p. 258). Whilst some universities are committing to developing Indigenous cultural competency among staff and students (Universities Australia, 2011), many individuals and institutions still find it challenging to have to engage with the unresolved legacies of colonialism. As Snyder *et al.* (2008) have noted, ‘the conscious appreciation of differences...needs to be inextricably tied to social justice by foregrounding the ways in which privilege and power are inequitably distributed in our society’ (p. 146).

This is extremely difficult work because it requires educators and students to be critically reflective in examining their own ‘multiple identity status’ and positionality within societal networks of privilege and power whilst ‘immersed within the same oppressive culture in which that worldview was formed—and within which it is sustained’ (Snyder *et al.*, 2008, p. 150). Furthermore, oppression is maintained ‘through marginalizing acts that are so culturally pervasive they often operate outside the threshold of awareness’ which can make the task of self-interrogation very difficult and confronting for members of dominant groups (p. 147). DiAngelo (2011) has highlighted, for example, how the ‘insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress’, which can result in strong negative emotional reactions and heightened cognitive dissonance for white people when racism is directly addressed in classroom settings (p. 55). This can often be displaced into defensive or aggressive behaviour directed at other students or academic staff (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014).

When working towards the crafting of ‘safer spaces’, therefore, the need to provide safety for students and staff of minoritised backgrounds is of paramount concern. There is a crucial need to differentiate between building a sense of safety within which it becomes possible to ask hard questions and to speak honestly about biases and dominant beliefs, and providing *validation* for such viewpoints. As Holly and Steiner (2005) have highlighted, ‘one student’s speaking up in a safe space has the potential to seriously harm another student’ (p. 52).

Our use of the term ‘safer spaces’ recognises that we cannot completely eliminate risk or discomfort from classrooms where we engage with such challenging and difficult work. Students from dominant cultural backgrounds need to be supported to understand ‘discomfort’ as a *positive* challenge that can build resilience and self-knowledge regarding their own identity and its impacts upon their life, and potentially the lives of others. The notion of ‘brave spaces’ has emerged as an alternative to the concept of ‘safe spaces’ (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2016). The need for ‘bravery’ in being willing to confront deeply held beliefs and to question received wisdom and worldviews is, in our perspective, part and parcel of a safe space. Nevertheless, we argue that a *specific* focus on ‘bravery’ can inadvertently transfer the burden of risk back onto the most vulnerable members of the classroom, for example, through requiring continuous emotional labour in the face of displays of ignorance or prejudice. Students and educators from minoritised backgrounds are often required to be ‘brave’ in this sense every day, all day—it does not add to the ‘safety’ of a classroom to explicitly rearticulate this daily reality by asking everyone to simply be ‘brave’. Whilst some academics advocate a pedagogical approach that *combines* ‘safe’ and ‘brave’ spaces (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Callan, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2016), it is our contention that the concept of ‘safer spaces’ not only recognises the impossibility of eliminating risk altogether but also sufficiently encompasses the notion of ‘brave spaces’ as supplementary, rather than being seen as an alternative *per se* to the idea of ‘safe spaces’.

These profound issues underscore the need to develop specialised, informed and critical approaches to facilitating the foundation of safer spaces, particularly within critical disciplines such as Indigenous Studies. Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies have an important role to play in creating environments within which staff and students from diverse backgrounds can thrive. This is, as Nakata has influentially termed it, teaching at the ‘cultural

interface': the 'contested space between the two knowledge systems...[where] things are not clearly black or white, Indigenous or Western' (Nakata, 2007, p. 9). It is not, however, an easy task to shift from a colonial to a decolonised space that engages alternative, and in particular, Indigenous approaches to education (Universities Australia, 2011). The Western paradigm enshrined within universities has traditionally prioritised the cognitive over the emotional components of teaching and learning, and advocated the removal of relationships from teaching environments in order to maintain 'objectivity' (Brockbank and McGill, 2007; Crossman, 2007; Overmars, 2010; Heath *et al.*, 2017). One of the challenges of decolonising approaches to building safer teaching spaces is therefore to *safely* and *appropriately* reintroduce relationships and emotional engagement into the teaching environment. This can be a significant challenge in Indigenous Studies classrooms where teaching at the cultural interface involves a range of complexities including the cultural backgrounds of educators and students, and their personal contexts in relation to understanding the ongoing legacies of colonialism (Page, 2014).

Crafting safer spaces: key lessons from the literature

Teaching methods that support the development of strong and trusting relationships between teaching staff and students are the foundation for crafting safer spaces in higher education. In this respect, Indigenous approaches to learning and knowledge provide culturally appropriate foundations for safer spaces as they 'require a respectful reciprocal relationship rather than assertion of control' (Overmars, 2010, p. 90). Storytelling is a particularly appropriate method for establishing these relationships within Indigenous Studies as it is 'a way of creating shared experience and discussing social identities to normalize students' feelings [and] create safe space through reinforcing common understanding' (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 51). The story, as both narrative and educational tool, is central to historic and contemporary teaching processes in many Indigenous communities and is distinct from the didactic top-down teaching method characteristic of 'Western' university 'lecturing'. For storytelling to be most effective, students also need to be supported in developing skills in active and supportive *listening*—another skill crucial to critical self-reflection, as discussed below (Aseron *et al.*, 2013).

Thoughtful planning of the curriculum and the physical space within the classroom also provides opportunities for creating stable foundations for safer classroom spaces. Restricting the exposure to unnecessarily traumatic material, measured 'pre-briefing' of sensitive material and targeted trigger warnings all provide students with 'sufficient predictability [and] choice about how they encounter material...and strategies for managing potential distress can empower students whose learning may otherwise be jeopardised' (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 8). Practical considerations, such as arranging seating so students can see and react to each other and attending to physical comfort (e.g. through minimising overcrowding and allowing opportunities for movement), have also been found to help support the establishment of safer spaces (Holley and Steiner, 2005). Including opportunities for different modalities of teaching and learning, such as embodied/physical exercises, is also an important consideration for developing greater *cultural* safety, as exemplified through Indigenous pedagogical approaches such as Yunkaporta's '8 Ways' model (Yunkaporta, 2009).

Ground rules or 'guidelines' have been identified as fundamental to the establishment of safer spaces in higher education (Holley

and Steiner, 2005; Snyder *et al.*, 2008; Adams, 2016). Common ground rules often include acknowledging the validity of everyone's voices, speaking from experience, directing critical feedback to ideas (not people) and emphasising fairness and respect in airing a wide variety of views. However, as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) have emphasised, if educators give equal time to dominant narratives in service of these rules, they can paradoxically serve to 'increase unequal power relations in the classroom' (p. 2). If 'ground rules' are utilised as an effective tactic towards building safer spaces, then part of the ground rules need to include the prerogative of the educator, as the person most responsible for the safety of everyone in the classroom, to restrict the intrusion of harmful narratives and microaggressions into the classroom (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014, p. 4).

The potential for successful disputation of problematic statements within a time-constrained classroom setting is curtailed by the potential harm that freely airing such views does to students or educators who identify with the group being maligned (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 52). Although 'exclusionary' tactics such as intervening in such discussions may violate the maxims of 'fairness' and 'everyone's opinion matters', which are cornerstones of much social justice education, 'there is institutional weight, a history of violence, the ongoing threat of violence, and the denial of social rights behind the dominant narrative, making the impact of that "side's" voice very different' (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014, p. 4). For similar reasons, the educator needs to be prepared to challenge erroneous claims such as the ubiquitous appeal to 'reverse isms', which are misnomers because they 'refer to power relations that are historic, embedded and pervasive...those relations do not flip back and forth; the same groups who have historically held institutional power...continue to do so' (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 66).

One of the strongest defences against individualistic outlooks that assert the equality of *all* perspectives and increase the negative impacts of microaggressions is to support students in critical self-analysis and reflection upon their own identity and positionality. Microaggressions, for example, pervade our culture partly because they typically operate outside the threshold of the perpetrator's conscious awareness. Hence, there is a pervasive need to raise consciousness about how microaggressions operate, as well as the impact they have on their targets (Snyder *et al.*, 2008, p. 148). The impact of 'white fragility' is a further example of the need to build self-awareness, critical reflection and stamina for dealing with conflicted matters. Because white people are largely able to live segregated lives, are taught to see themselves in an 'objective' role which is positioned as outside of 'culture' and are generally able to remain racially comfortable, they have not had to justify their place in society, and have not had to develop the resilience and stamina for constructive dialogue regarding racism and privilege (DiAngelo, 2011). In our experience, both students and staff can be resistant to progressive curricula. Further, students and staff who are broadly supportive of social justice goals but have not developed their capacities for self-reflection can also react defensively to language or content perceived as challenging their racial comfort.

Supporting students to be critically reflective on their own positionality and confront difficult emotions as they arise requires the educator to develop skills in their *own* self-awareness and emotional management, as well as operating as a *facilitator* and co-learner, not simply a didactic instructor transferring content to passive recipients. Although these are skills that have not traditionally been valued in academia, they are increasingly important

in preparing graduates for work in diverse and challenging contemporary workplaces (Brockbank and McGill, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2017). Most importantly, genuinely transformative learning ‘involves not only deconstructing meanings and the taken-for-granted attitudes and myths and ways of seeing things, but also reconstructing by reconceptualising and rebuilding’ (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p. 57). In a safe and trusting environment, students can be supported to create significant conceptual changes through the measured engagement of emotions in the learning process:

The components of constructivist knowledge are those that lead to a recognition of relationship in learning, that is, connectedness to another... empathy and awareness of feelings [are] all characteristics of engaging in reflective learning (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p. 47).

Encouraging effective group work can also contribute to safer classrooms. Group work, including group assessment tasks, in-class activities and small group discussions, provides significant opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, can be motivating and intellectually challenging, and can enhance learning. It is also fraught with challenges that *may* result in negative experiences unless the group work exercises are carefully designed and planned. Group work is potentially even more transformative (as well as ‘risky’) when the subject matter is sensitive. Strategies that increase the effectiveness of group work include allowing scope for choice (e.g. of topics or group members), modelling of appropriate relationships and strategies within a whole class discussion, providing detailed mechanisms for peer-to-peer feedback and being explicit about the rationale behind doing group work (Strauss and Alice, 2007; Burdett and Hastie, 2009).

Finally, as Snyder *et al.* (2008) have emphasised, providing a sense of hope and a vision for the future, as well as practical tools for initiating change is an ethical obligation incumbent on teachers delivering confronting material about the impacts of social dynamics (p. 148). Doing this successfully can make a significant contribution to the sense of ‘safety’ of the classroom. Part of this sense of hope can be established through the successful negotiation of sensitive and controversial subjects by staff and students of diverse backgrounds. All too often, we are presented with the belief that sensitive topics are too confrontational to be discussed openly and honestly in public spheres. Successful discussion of sensitive topics builds confidence for future engagement and continued critical self-reflection. These are skills that will inevitably be valuable for future interpersonal and workplace communication (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 7).

Crafting safer spaces: our approach

The starting point for building safer spaces is the acknowledgement and awareness of our own culture and background and consideration of the impact this has upon our approaches to learning and teaching. We therefore highlight that this paper was jointly written by an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous academic working collaboratively. Leticia is a white woman originally from the Snowy Mountains who was the first in her family to attend university. This posed challenges for adjusting to university life, however has also helped her to recognise the privileges that accrue in the academy to those from dominant cultural and racial backgrounds. She has been involved with anti-racism activism for 15 years and has taught social justice in higher education for over 10 years. Lynette is a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman from

Dubbo and Moree with more than 40 years’ experience as an administrator and teacher in Aboriginal education within primary schools, high schools, TAFE and universities. As an Aboriginal person, she has been required to not only theorise about what was occurring to and for Aboriginal young people, and their communities, but also to be actively involved in researching new solutions and effecting sustainable change for Aboriginal programmes.

Our case study analysis emerged from the process of collaboratively crafting ‘safer spaces’ within a unit of study that the authors co-taught at an urban Australian university (Lynette as a Unit of Study Coordinator and Leticia as a guest lecturer). This unit, which encompassed issues of race, racism and Indigenous Australia, had been recently reviewed and redeveloped as a core senior unit of study for a new Major in Indigenous Studies offered in a Bachelor of Arts award course and was also offered as an elective in other courses, including the Bachelor of Education.

Although Indigenous Studies as a discipline emerged from colonialist research dominated by anthropological and ethnographic studies, it is increasingly taught as a *critical* discipline founded in decolonial methodologies and approaches (Townsend-Cross, 2018). There is a distinction, however, between Indigenous Studies *per se* and the education of Indigenous students; whilst Indigenous students may constitute a proportion of Indigenous Studies units and programmes, the cohort is likely to also include students from a wide range of other backgrounds (Page *et al.*, 2017). As Thorpe and Burgess (2016) have emphasised, while the interdisciplinary field of Indigenous Studies provides ‘a complex, challenging and oftentimes uncomfortable learning experience’, especially for students who enter with naïve or hostile perspectives, at the same time it ‘has the potential to shift non-Indigenous students’ stereotypes, overcome biases, misrepresentations and historical omissions’ (p. 119). At the heart of the tension between these simultaneous challenges and opportunities, ‘is Indigenous contestation of Western worldviews, philosophies, knowledge, theories, methods, histories, and positioning of Indigenous people’ (Nakata *et al.*, 2012, p. 122).

Intersectionality is an important and complementary approach to critical Indigenous Studies because it facilitates analysis of how different forms of social group categorisation and oppression interact. It ‘draws attention to the fluid and supporting ways in which systems of inequality and social division generate hybrid forms of social disadvantage’, and the ways that we can be simultaneously privileged due to some aspects of our identity, but oppressed in regards to others (Buchanan and Jamieson, 2016, p. 226). Since first articulated by critical race theorist Crenshaw (1990, 2011), the concept of intersectionality has proved particularly useful for highlighting the differential and intersecting impacts of race, class and gender. These are essential but challenging topics for consideration in an Indigenous Studies unit (Buchanan and Jamieson, 2016).

There are limited higher education spaces to safely discuss ‘sensitive’ issues, such as intersectional approaches to understanding interactions of racism and sexism in regards to sexual violence. Teaching on these topics is often presented impersonally, or ‘objectively’, without regard to the fact that many live with these issues in their daily lives. The incidence of sexual harassment and sexual assault at Australian universities is unacceptably high, and there is a strong likelihood that some students and educators within any given classroom will have a history of trauma (AHRC, 2017). For those who experience intersectional impacts, such as Indigenous women, the consequences of inappropriate and ‘unsafe’ teaching approaches when canvassing sensitive

material are even further exacerbated (Buchanan and Jamieson, 2016; Heath *et al.*, 2017). Above all, it is important to acknowledge that 'the starting point for designing a learning environment for teaching sensitive material is to minimise harm' (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 8).

This case study analysis reflects the crystallisation of our thoughts in terms of our efforts to wrestle with these tensions. We focus specifically on exploring the development of an interactive seminar on the topic of 'Intersectionality: Class, Race and Gender' for the unit described above. This topic was conceptually and emotionally difficult to teach. Feedback from staff and students involved in previous delivery of this particular seminar indicated that it had repeatedly triggered intense emotional reactions and disruptive peer-to-peer and student-to-staff conflict. Since this seminar had been experienced as a profoundly 'unsafe space' in the past, we therefore paid particular attention to redeveloping our handling of this topic. In the following sections, we provide an outline of our approach and subjective analysis of the impact of the modified delivery, with the hope that the detailed description of class activities will be instructive for colleagues.

Crafting safer spaces: a case study

Our approach to crafting a safer space for teaching about race, racism and intersectionality started with a commitment to working collaboratively and supporting each other. Given the lack of safety that some educators and students reported experiencing in this unit in previous years, we perceived the need for a united front in developing a more effective approach. Co-teaching, especially with one academic staff member being Indigenous and the other non-Indigenous, was an effective strategy for us in preparing for and managing the dynamics within the classroom. We reviewed all class materials closely together in order to assess cultural appropriateness, and discussed where and to what extent pre-briefing or trigger warnings were required. We flagged in advance points where additional support in the classroom might be required, such as addressing microaggressions, white fragility and emotional reactions to our topics, and debriefed thoroughly after classes. Our solidarity meant we could mitigate some of the impacts of teaching sensitive topics, which are compounded by isolation—a common feature of the neoliberalised teaching environment (Anderson *et al.*, 2019; Heath *et al.*, 2017). It also provided a hopeful and instructive model of respectful and constructive intercultural dialogue for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in our classroom.

We secured an extra-large seminar room with moveable furniture and a 2 h timeframe for weekly seminar-workshops, rather than the more traditional format of two 1 h lectures per week delivered in a lecture theatre with fixed benches. This gave us time to address sensitive issues appropriately, provided more physical comfort for students, enabled us to intersperse traditional 'lecture' content with interactive and embodied exercises and to realign furniture into pedagogically appropriate formats like circles. After the weekly 2 h seminar, students had a short break and then attended tutorials for further small group discussion.

The seminar on intersectionality took place mid-session and students were advised a week in advance that it would include distressing topics such as sexual violence and police brutality. At the start of the seminar, the pre-briefing was reiterated, and students were informed that other protocols would be followed during class to minimise distress. Required readings focussed on the core concepts of intersectionality and privilege (e.g. Crenshaw,

1990), and recommended readings involving more contentious analysis of core concepts (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, 2000) were introduced in tutorial groups rather than the whole group seminar. This was so that particularly challenging and confronting implications of intersectional analysis could be discussed in a small group with students who had developed a solid grounding in key concepts through the seminar, and who already had a rapport with each other and their tutor which made deeper discussion of sensitive topics possible. The seminar was carefully structured to provide a mix of delivery methods, which also enabled time for regular debriefing between educators and students. The first section of the seminar consisted of a lecture-style overview of key concepts, followed by an embodied 'Privilege Walk' exercise on intersectionality and identity (this exercise will be discussed in more detail below). After a whole-class debrief and short break, a further lecture-style segment provided an extended analysis of identity, intersectionality and power. The class then engaged in a guided 'Identity Mapping' exercise.

The seminar commenced with an overview of the history and core concepts of intersectionality. A short video from the African-American transgender activist Cox (2013) was shown and deliberately stopped mid-clip, just prior to Cox providing graphic details of transphobic violence, which may have been triggering and distracting for some students. The selected excerpt illustrated the intersection of racism and sexism in regards to harassment of and violence against trans women of colour. Crenshaw's approach to intersectionality was then examined in the context of the #SayHerName social media campaign, which sought to raise awareness of police brutality directed towards women of colour in the United States. The key point in this campaign was the heightened marginalisation of women of colour, even in the #BlackLivesMatter campaign: cases of men of colour who have been killed by police are more widely known, for example, than those of women (Brown *et al.*, 2017).

Raising awareness of the extent of institutionalised violence against Indigenous women was crucial, yet among many Indigenous Australian communities, it is not appropriate to publicly say the name or circulate images of a recently deceased person. We therefore developed an exercise that was more culturally appropriate for our context. We discussed the #SayHerName campaign, outlined the reasons why we would not be using names in our discussion of specific cases, and then asked students to *think of cases of deaths or assaults in police or prison custody (or during the process of arrest)*. We then asked students to raise their hand if they could think of more than one case which involved (a) African-American men, (b) Indigenous Australian men, (c) African-American women or (d) Indigenous Australian women. Most students knew of many cases relating to African-American men, and at least one involving an Indigenous Australian man. Very few members of the class knew of cases involving African-American women and only one student was aware of cases involving Indigenous Australian women. This activity clearly demonstrated the heightened visibility of the experiences of *men* of colour in comparison to those of *women* of colour. Students also reported being troubled by their high level of knowledge about the experiences of African-Americans compared to Indigenous Australian people, in a class composed almost exclusively of domestic Australian students.

The lecturer next discussed the intersection of racism and sexism in regards to high profile cases of deaths in custody and sexual violence affecting Indigenous Australian women. Lecture slides were carefully worded so as to convey the gravity of the offences committed and to emphasise the intersection of racism, class and

sexism in the criminal acts and legal responses, but avoided the inclusion of overly distressing detail. The names of victims and survivors were omitted from slides, and instead hyperlinks were provided with further information about all cases, with strong trigger warnings (e.g., for Langton, 2016).

After a short debrief on the lecture content and exercises, students undertook a variation of the 'Privilege Walk', an embodied exercise frequently used in diversity education settings to highlight the unearned advantages of racial privilege (see e.g. Pennington *et al.*, 2012). Participants typically line up at one end of a room, and in response to statements read out by a facilitator, take one step forwards or one step backwards based on their personal experiences or stay still if the statement is not relevant to them. The activity usually ends with participants ranged across the room, reflecting privileges they receive on the basis of their membership of particular dominant social groups (e.g. being white or being male) or disadvantages on the basis of the membership of minoritised social groups (e.g. being a woman or being of a low socio-economic background).

The 'Privilege Walk' activity as it is normally conducted is problematic in our view: it can result in teaching some (the more privileged in the group) at the expense of others (the less privileged in the group, who are generally already well aware of the impacts of privilege in social standing and opportunity). This was at odds with our imperative to ensure that we took into account the possible impacts of all activities on the most vulnerable in the class. We therefore adapted the exercise to reflect methods used to teach intersectional approaches to family violence in the Australian Family Law System (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). Our version used assigned identity cards rather than a person's real identity, requiring them to respond to the questions read out by the facilitator by *imagining* the impact upon their *assigned* identity. Examples of assigned identities included Contractor (26, male, working in a remote mining community, separated with one child); Police Liaison Officer (35, Aboriginal, male, working in his own community, married with three children); Young Girl (13, Aboriginal, with a hearing impairment, living in a regional town). Examples of the statements read by the Facilitator included: 'If I am accused of a crime I can expect to be safe in custody', and 'I can leave my partner if they threaten my safety'. Participants were therefore encouraged to develop imaginative empathy, and deepen their understanding of the core concepts of intersectionality and privilege, through a lower risk approach.

In the extended debrief that followed the exercise, students were encouraged to describe their reasoning for their decisions to step forward, stand still or step back in response to particular key statements. They were encouraged to discuss their responses to the exercise in terms of imagining the impacts of intersectionality that resulted in some participants being able to progress the whole way across the room whilst others were unable to find room at the back of the class to step back any further. Students were asked explicitly about their emotional responses: one discussion question, for example, asked students to consider how they felt regarding the fact that some participants ended up further ahead than others. Finally, students were asked to consider how intersectionality contributes to our understanding of the relationship between social groups, privilege and power. Following the completion of the debrief, students took a short break to regroup before commencing the final part of the class.

In the final section of the class, we utilised a multi-stage 'Identity Mapping' exercise adapted from Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017, p. 46). Initially, a blank table with a column for 'dominant

agent/groups' and 'minoritised groups' was presented to students, who worked in small groups discussing examples of dominant and minoritised groups in Australian society. After a whole class discussion of the differences and similarities between different groups' responses, guided through a sample prepared by the lecturer, we moved to another version of the table, this time completed by Leticia a personal identity mapping. Using a storytelling/narrative approach, she explained how she had come to perceive her membership of particular groups, how her identification had shifted over time and why there were some aspects of her identity she kept private.

Finally, students were provided with a blank version of the table and a blank Venn diagram of overlapping circles and instructed to individually 'map out your own identity and consider the idea of intersectionality as it applies to your identity'. Students were not *required* to share any of this information, since some may not have been comfortable disclosing aspects of their identity. Some students did however volunteer to share some of their personal stories as part of the exercise. After some time for quiet reflection, the class concluded with a joint discussion between the two co-lecturers on the importance of *listening* as a reflective strategy and as a tool for building self-awareness and reducing denial of painful truths (especially in regards to the concept of 'white fragility'). The class therefore ended with the positive modelling of the supportive and respectful working relationship of the two educators.

Evaluating the success of our interventions

Although this article was not designed or intended to be interpreted as an empirical study, some points about the evidence for the consideration of our case study as successful are warranted. Past delivery of this seminar had included painful and confronting experiences for students and educators. Discomfort with challenging decolonial material and white fragility can often be displaced into defensive or aggressive behaviour directed at other students or academic staff, especially if they are from minoritised backgrounds such as being women or being Indigenous, and this was characteristic of the classroom in this unit prior to our interventions (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014; Page, 2014). The task of researching and preparing for this seminar was certainly emotionally draining and triggering in some regards for the educators, an issue which requires further research and exploration. However, the redeveloped seminar itself went exceptionally well. It did not trigger hostile peer-to-peer or student-educator interactions and conflict as in previous iterations, and created more scope for maximising the learning opportunities. The open and trusting communications between students and staff supported a reflective and transformative dialogue, which from our perspective continued into subsequent tutorials and throughout the remainder of the unit.

We did not initially set out to solicit student feedback explicitly on this seminar, yet students went out of their way during and after the class to communicate to us that the delivery of sensitive material and confrontational topics was delicately and respectfully handled from their perspective. In a private conversation outside the classroom, two young female students approached Leticia to draw strong contrasts between the safety of the approach in this unit of study and their experiences in other aspects of their higher education experience in regards to the discussion of sexual violence. These indications that our model was reducing possible harms for those educators and students for whom the topics

were most likely to have personal significance indicated the success of our interventions. Consequently, our model has been retained for subsequent iterations of this unit and key learnings are being rolled out into other units and programmes at the home institutions of the two authors.

Conclusion: crafting safer spaces within Australian higher education

Teaching staff in higher education need support and encouragement for developing skills, expertise and appropriate pedagogies to build safer spaces within their classrooms. Intervention strategies aimed at building the cultural competency of educators and their capacity to build safer spaces within their classrooms are imperative. These skills have not traditionally been valued within academia: taking stock of the role of emotions and relationships in higher education teaching is difficult, for example, because the academy was built 'on the premise that intellect was superior to body and that only the mind could be rational, the emotions being untrustworthy' (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p. 46). Similarly, trying to introduce decolonising approaches can conflict with the traditional siting of the academy as holding a monopoly on knowledge and truth. For some teachers, therefore, crafting 'safer spaces' in the classroom may actually feel *unsafe*, at least at first. The type of transformational learning and teaching required to teach 'difficult knowledge' through 'uncomfortable pedagogies' (Townsend-Cross and Flowers, 2016) requires educators to develop new ways of seeing their role and relating in different ways to students. This may require 'a paradigm shift', which is most likely to occur 'where teachers are supported by opportunities to engage in reflective dialogue themselves, as well as by departmental, faculty and institutional support' (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p. 62).

Our discussion and analysis has outlined the urgent need for safer teaching spaces, in particular through considering the divergence between increased diversity in educator and student recruitment in recent decades and the evidence of poorer experiences and outcomes for educators and students from diverse backgrounds. The benefits of working through the challenges of delivering higher education in different ways, and in learning how to collaboratively craft safer teaching and learning spaces were illustrated in our case study. We were able to transform a profoundly unsafe teaching environment into a safer space with quality learning outcomes sustained across the teaching session.

One future direction for our own research will be to undertake formal research with our students to evaluate the impact of our interventions over successive iterations of teaching the unit. The other important area requiring further research is the need to explore in more detail the conditions necessary for increasing the experience of safety for educators working on sensitive topics, especially within disciplines as charged as Indigenous Studies. Teaching sensitive topics *and* teaching sensitively 'in a manner that supports both student and teacher welfare should be understood as a disciplinary and institutional responsibility rather than simply the duty of a few passionate and committed educators' (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 6).

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- Dr Leticia Anderson** is a Lecturer in Humanities at Southern Cross University (Australia). Leticia has a dual research focus on inclusive and transformational higher education and on race relations and Islamophobia in contemporary Australian society. Her current research is particularly focussed on strategies for connecting cultural competence to social justice curricula, and on evaluating representations of Islam and Muslims in Australian election reporting. Leticia formerly worked at the University of Sydney, including as a Lecturer at the National Centre for Cultural Competence and as Degree Director for the Master of Peace and Conflict Studies at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.
- Dr Lynette Riley** is a Senior Lecturer in Aboriginal Education at the University of Sydney (Australia). Lynette is a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman from Dubbo and Moree with more than 40 years' experience as an administrator and teacher in Aboriginal education within primary schools, high schools, TAFE and universities, as well as within state government. She is an awarded educator and researcher, and as an Indigenous artist has had her work displayed in numerous exhibitions. Lynette is currently the Leader of Indigenous Strategy for the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.