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USING *the* 'ARTS' *to* TEACH INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN STUDIES *in* HIGHER EDUCATION

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■ Abstract

This paper will discuss some personal philosophies and rationales in approaching and delivering Indigenous Australian studies – approaches that have been influenced and informed by experienced and knowledgeable educators both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It doesn't aim or pretend to be unique or innovative in its arguments or approach; instead, it is a reflection on the pathway taken by one Indigenous educator and the thinking behind this – at least at this point in time. As such, it adopts a philosophy that "it's important to know where we've come from in order to make sense of where we are and where we might be heading". It is hoped that through this reflection and by offering an example of how art (as performance/role-play) has been used in one of my teaching sessions that I might make more sense of my personal practice and contribute in some small way to the important and ongoing debates surrounding teaching Indigenous Australian studies.

■ Introduction

Being an Indigenous Australian working within higher education is a very privileged position that is the result of the persistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, political activists and the wider community – and should not be taken for granted. Alliances can sometimes be difficult to form between the needs of the academy and the expectations and commitment to Indigenous communities. Suspicions and mistrust can sometimes blur the line between productive dialogues and regurgitated rhetorics. The need to be seen to be doing the right thing for the right reasons can sometimes hinder progression and challenge confidences for Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and students participating in Indigenous Australian studies in universities (Nakata, 2004, p. 2).

While not presuming to offer any real solutions to the tensions between academia and Indigenous perspectives, this paper suggests the need to search for some common ground to begin to initiate a dialogue in a way that can offer an inclusive and safe position for students and educators. This should not be seen as in anyway negating the value of Indigenous community consultation and involvement in teaching Indigenous Australian studies. Community consultation is essential in developing an Indigenous Australian perspective in curricula – it reinforces a philosophy of teaching with, rather than about, Indigenous peoples. Such consultation reaffirms the diversity of cultures and history for the numerous Aboriginal nations throughout Australia and rebuts the myth that there is such a thing as one Aboriginal opinion or perspective (Board of Studies NSW, 2001, pp. 3, 6 & 11). Indigenous perspectives should be included in the classroom so that value differences can be "mediated rather than viewed as irreconcilable" (Hudspith, 1996, in Harrison, 2004, p. 99). Within non-Indigenous education systems there has been a failure to provide equitable services to Indigenous peoples "that nurture the whole Indigenous person inclusive of scholarship, culture and spirituality" (WIPCE, 1999, p. 1).

■ Background

One can't do battle with Western systems of thought without understanding it, likewise, its

inconsistencies cannot be turned around and an Indigenous perspective substituted without rigorous understanding of Indigenous concepts (Nakata, 2004, p. 9).

In my current work at the University of Technology Sydney (which is situated on Cadigal land), I teach a number of subjects under the "major" title of "Aboriginal studies" to mostly Indigenous Australian away-from-base block groups (where students travel to Sydney for face-to-face sessions and then return to their home communities to complete their assignment work). A self-imposed challenge initially was that I am someone who has grown up in an urban environment (a Wiradjuri woman living on Dharrug land) with a greater access to formal education processes and opportunities, but with far less life experience with Indigenous Australian cultural practices than the majority of the student group. In the past five years of lecturing in such programs my experience has been a very positive one, where classes take the form of learning exchanges – and I am always left feeling like I have learnt something new and important.

Similar to the concerns expressed by non-Indigenous educators about what their role should be in teaching Indigenous Australian studies (Fielding, 2004, p. 1; McConaghy, 2000, pp. 11-12), Indigenous educators are also faced with personal and community conflicts and expectations. Questions consistently arise as to what we should teach, what we can teach, and how we should teach it. It would be an unrealistic expectation to imagine that any one person could be an "expert" on Indigenous Australian studies. There are hundreds of Indigenous nations in this country – and while there are some issues that unite and that are representative of value systems and beliefs, there are also important considerations that make each nation unique. An Indigenous educator does not negate the need for community consultation and involvement in Indigenous Australian studies. More often than not, Indigenous educators find themselves employed in other Indigenous peoples' countries. There is a need for educators to be able to clearly define to students, colleagues and communities the role that we play in the education process. This need is not only about achieving good practice but also about creating a "safe" position from which the educator can speak – as Nakata reminds us, "an Indigenous intellectual is as much an object of suspicion as a non-Indigenous one" (2004, p. 2).

What is done in universities is mainstream studies, with mainstream assessments. This imposes the expectations and limitations of the institution and as such the lecturer may only be able to assess student work in this way. It is also important to remember that students have entered the university to gain mainstream skills to allow them to operate more effectively within the different government and other institutions – most

will, and have learnt, to varying degrees, the cultural practices and philosophies of Indigenous Australia from their families and communities. However, within the limitations of mainstream higher education we are afforded an opportunity to discuss, research and debate issues of great personal value. Students should expect a quality education and are more than capable of achieving and excelling at acceptable academic standards – which they have paid for often more than in monetary forms (McDaniel & Flowers, 1995). Lowering academic standards on the pretence of catering for Indigenous students is unnecessary and is a form of institutionalised racism that only serves to reinforce negative stereotypes. While such titles as "higher education" would seem to indicate the importance of one system of learning over others, the reality is that the value of any form of education is in how we can use the skills we acquire.

A mainstream higher education can afford us with the opportunity to begin to "name" our issues and concerns in a way to reach a far wider audience. Often we do this not just for ourselves, but as a way to negotiate a more workable dialogue with non-Indigenous peoples. Colonialist systems have used the act of "naming" to represent themselves as authorities by identifying and categorising what they deem as significant in other cultures (McConaghy, 2000, p. 124). By reclaiming our right to "name" our issues in our own words and from our own perspectives we invariably challenge past epistemologies, but must do so to create a pathway for future dialogues and new ways of thinking. The more ways you can tell your "story" the more people you can reach. While gaining an "academic voice" can be a very valuable resource it does not mean that students need to/or will lose the voice they have. Having gained such a "voice" can create opportunities for collaborations with other educators – Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Maintaining the "voice" you have can ensure that such collaborations can be shared with family and community – one of the aims of such programs as "away-from-base" which is designed for students to take the skills they acquire at university back into their communities.

■ Indigenous people and education

If an Indigenous person chooses to access an Indigenous education system, then this is a choice, which must be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access non-Indigenous education, then this choice must also be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access both non-Indigenous and Indigenous systems of education, then this choice too must be respected. Not to do so is in itself a violation of a basic human right (WIPCE, 1999, p. 5).

Historically, education has been used in an attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples (WIPCE, 1999, p. 2). One way of addressing the issue of "inclusion" in Australian education institutions was the introduction of what is referred to as "Indigenisation" – the creating of a "space" for Indigenous peoples, content, practices and perspectives. While not negating the positive outcomes of such policies it is important to note that its inclusion into the academy "is always circumscribed by non-Indigenous systems of thought" (Nakata, 2004, p. 9). Other related approaches such as "cultural relativism" aspire to be more "sensitive" to Indigenous Australians but can interpret difference in relation to what it presents as pedagogical "problems" in negative terms such as "educational failure; high drop-out rates; poor student attendance, concentration, or language abilities; lack of student motivation; and so on" (McConaghy, 2000, p. 189). Mainstream education systems structure knowledge in ways that it can be "organised, manipulated and controlled" (Harrison, 2004, p. 123). Indeed,

in more recent times, due to the involvement of Indigenous peoples, research shows that failure is indeed present, but that this failure is that of the system, not of Indigenous peoples. In this context the so-called "drop-out rates and failures" of Indigenous peoples within non-Indigenous educational systems must be viewed for what they really are – rejection rates (WIPCE, 1999, p.3).

■ Common ground in arts education

A more productive dialogue between the academy, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can be achieved by searching for some common ground between the beliefs and practices of Indigenous Australians and the pedagogies and curricula available to mainstream higher education (Wunungmurra, in McConaghy, 2000, p. 105). One way this can be addressed is by searching for similarities in the way we transfer and understand information. For Indigenous Australian peoples the arts have always played an important role in teaching and recording lessons and events. Indigenous Australian identity is intrinsically tied to a relationship to country and is reflected through cultural practices that are continually represented through the arts (Johnson, 2001). All uses of the arts are intrinsically tied with every aspect of life and create a holistic system for the transference of knowledge. The use of song, dance, story, music and painting compliment and enhance each other to form an overlapping and integrated expression of cultural identity (Janke, 1998, p. 2; Ryan, 1997, p. 77).

The use of the arts in Indigenous Australia is a systematic style of teaching and learning that reinforces

a very complex reference system that safeguards the validity and integrity of kinship systems. These unite all relationships of family, community, spirituality and land. Such a learning environment creates teachings that are cerebral, visual, physical and emotional. They allow us not just to memorise information but to also understand it on different levels utilising different senses. For Indigenous Australians "oral histories" are usually connected directly to a physical location or site – in this way the teachings are protected by and in the land (Berndt & Berndt, 1989, pp. 5-6). The knowledge to access these teachings is passed to selected members of Indigenous Australian clan groups and relayed to others where appropriate through story, dance, song, and visual means (Bell, 2002, p. 95).

Art connects Indigenous Australians to their past and present. It is a way to successfully transfer cultural and technical knowledge. Indigenous Australian art is continually practiced in rural, remote and urban settings and has adapted and evolved to incorporate new media and materials. The way in which different forms of art are used has also evolved (Meekison, 2000). While still maintaining and honouring culture and knowledge, its continued use to ensure the survival of culture has seen art become a voice for social justice and for some communities, as an economic commodity. Such practices and incorporation of new medias does not negate the maintenance of cultural importance or protocol. The evolution of Indigenous art allows the artists to speak to a wider audience (Perkins, 2005, p. 17). Similarly, the adaptation of Indigenous learning styles and practices into mainstream education systems through the use of the arts can offer the learner and facilitator new ways to engage with information.

We can never hope to emulate the complexities of Indigenous Australian learning systems within the limitations that we are presented with in mainstream higher education institutions (such as the learning environment, time limitations and the need to maintain measurable academic assessment standards). Utilising different forms of the arts can, however, offer learners an empathy and understanding of a range of experiential and transformative learning experiences. It can offer learners an opportunity to express their stories and views in a multitude of voices that embrace a popular communications ideology – that is, a voice that is "action-orientated" and inclusive. It breaks down the barriers of written and spoken language and engages with symbols, sounds, movements and the learners' own ways of knowing that are then interpreted beyond the limitations of conventional schooling systems (Millado & Tan, 1997, pp. 1-3).

It is important to be able to institute stimulating teaching activities without compromising learning principles (Craven, D'Arbon & Wilson-Miller, 1999, p. 231). Traditional formal learning environments can often be rigid and unchallenging. The use of simulations, games and other forms of interactive experience-based

learning can address some of the limitations of the traditional paradigms. Learning takes place in a variety of settings both structured and informal. It is not just the acquisition of skills but also knowing how to put these skills to use (Ruben, 1999).

The use of the arts in Indigenous Australian studies can address what is sometimes viewed as a lack of meaningful perspective and lived experience within curriculum and teaching. This lack of perspective has been described as the colonising of Indigenous voices. Indigenous people often express concern about how and who deciphers and relays information in relation to Indigenous cultures. These concerns include a fear that cultural protocols and restrictions are not adhered to and that the person translating this information will be viewed as being an expert or authority in relaying this. For Indigenous Australian peoples, identity is connected with being part of a community, a connection to place and a responsibility to both. It has also been argued that some areas of Indigenous Australian studies may seem "too difficult or too painful" for learners and educators to engage with and as such only issues deemed as "comfortable" are included in curricula and practice (McConaghy, 2003, p. 11).

For the purpose of utilising art in teaching Indigenous Australian studies in a university, it will be defined as experiential and transformative learning techniques that are used to enhance and motivate more traditional mainstream learning environments and practices. Such techniques should offer learners a varied and engaging system of resources that compliment and reinforce each other. Art is not limited to just an act of creation, but relies on the learning that takes place in the process and evaluation. Incorporating the arts into teaching practices can begin to offer learners an insight into its importance to Indigenous Australians in maintaining the credibility and continuation of knowledge and culture. Within mainstream higher education experiential and transformative learning techniques are a way to deal with sensitive and often confronting situations. Experiential learning has been described as "new ways of knowing being drawn from old ways of knowing" (Malinen, 2000, p. 136) and then being transferred into a more organised (constructed) form. Such learning is also reliant on social interaction in order to challenge epistemological beliefs (Malinen, 2000, pp. 136-138).



An example of how art as role-play has been used in an Aboriginal studies class

The following is an overview of a teaching session run with Indigenous Australian students as part of a topic on "Native Title". In order to deal with what is a very emotive issue for most students, they were asked to participate in a role-play as part of a class exercise. This exercise invariably forces students to rely on verbal communication skills. One of the aims of this is to make participants "name" their issues and to

highlight some of the limitations of written and verbal communication. Students were put into four separate groups – each group was asked to choose an envelope (each of which contained a copy of all information) – and specified which role each group must represent.

Information given to students

Each group will be given a set amount of time to prepare and present an argument to the "Committee" outlining their claim to a piece of land as presented in each group's individual information. Each group (except the Committee) is free to negotiate and discuss any issues with any of the other groups prior to the commencement of the Committees hearing.

Group 1: Traditional owners

Your group represents the Indigenous peoples who are custodians for a piece of land currently being leased to a Cattle Station Cooperative who have started an abattoir business and who have placed an access road next to a significant cultural site.

Group 2: Neighbouring Indigenous peoples

Your group traditionally had shared responsibility for the cultural site in question.

Group 3: Cattle station owners

Your cooperative have held the lease on the property in question for the past four years and have developed a successful abattoir business. Because of the surrounding terrain of the land, the current access road is situated in the only viable position to gain access to the abattoir – moving the road would not be practical and would ultimately bankrupt the small but growing business.

Group 4: The Committee

Your role as the Committee is to determine a structure for hearing the arguments from all participating groups and to ensure they are all given an equal amount of time to be heard. All arguments and comments can only be made directly to the Committee – once the deliberation has started groups are not allowed to address each other, any clarifications or comments must be made to the Committee who will decide whether or not to follow these up with any of the other groups. At the end of the hearing the Committee members will deliberate and make a recommendation of their findings.

Feedback on this session

The information given to students is purposely limited. Ultimately students will use their own experiences to

create a far richer and detailed story. Each group's story will undoubtedly clash with the "facts" created by opposing groups and will result in frustrations especially as they are not allowed to direct questions or comments to each other. Discussions surrounding this process usually relate to the fact that we can have different "truths" – one person's account of an incident or event doesn't always correlate with someone else. It isn't necessarily that someone is lying, but more that we can all view the same issues or events in very different ways based on our own life experiences and beliefs. It is also immensely frustrating when we are denied the right to reply or respond to an issue especially when we find we have an emotional attachment to the subject of the discussion.

Inevitably it becomes a far greater challenge for the group deemed as "traditional custodians" to present their argument. This is despite their usual first reaction of being given what they consider to be the best role. We discuss how difficult it is when in your heart you believe that something is right and incredibly important but have to verbally justify your views. Throughout the presentation from this group their responses to questions from the Committee asking for clarification as to why this site is important are not always clear – with some members answering "you know". In contrast the group who are to be the cattle station owners (who ultimately stress over having to argue such a position) are able to stay detached and objective and develop a far better structured argument based on familiar and convincing proposals of creating an economy and work prospects for the local community.

The neighbouring community, who have what they consider to be a shared responsibility and right to access, will sometimes form an alliance with the traditional owner group or will sometimes be forced to argue their position as a third party. This opens up a discussion of how concepts of ownership can turn different groups against each other. While some groups may embrace shared access, they can be far more cautious when a claim is aimed as some form of official ownership.

When we reflect on this class exercise, and examine the emotional attachment we form with this "make believe site", we can then start to imagine what it might be like if we were faced with going through a real land claim process. We are able to then begin to address some of the frustrations different groups go through when dealing with a Native Title tribunal session or even more limiting a court hearing, where they will have a legal representative argue on their behalf on points of law – not on what the land means to individuals and communities.

Such an exercise addresses the real possibility that some students will or have been involved in Native Title claims and may find this a difficult subject to speak about. The role-play exercise use of small

groups allows students to participate in different ways – those who may not be comfortable speaking in front of the whole class may take on a role of contributing to the smaller group discussions and delegate the speaking role to others. It can offer students who may not have direct involvement in Native Title claims an insight to the frustrations felt by classmates and some Indigenous Australian communities directly involved in these processes. It can also begin to allow us further opportunities to discuss the limitations of mainstream systems of transferring knowledge and some of the conflicts this causes for Indigenous Australia.

An example of an attempt to address such limitations through the use of the arts is described by Galarwuy Yunupingu (1997, p. 65) in his writings about the "Barunga Statement" (a bark petition) opposing mining in northeast Arnhem Land that was presented to the Australian Government in 1963. Yunupingu explains how attempts to relay their protests in discussions became increasingly frustrating for his people, partly because very few non-Aboriginal people had ever tried to learn their language and also because they found the English language was inadequate in describing the relationship they have to the land. They decided to tell their story through visual images on a bark petition. These images represented the different lands, rituals, rights and responsibilities that were under threat. The different styles and designs used in the painting represented the different Aboriginal countries uniting in the same struggle. The disappointing result from the petition (and subsequent court ruling upholding the doctrine of *terra nullius* – which denied the existence of Indigenous peoples prior to colonisation) is seen by Yunupingu as a limitation of mainstream Australia whose visual language he describes as "essentially two-dimensional" and unable to interpret the complexities of the painting. He explains:

Indigenous art has become central to the expression of the conflict between Indigenous and other Australians. Yet Indigenous art is also a tool of mediation or a means by which to negotiate the middle ground. Whether the art is a shell necklace from Tasmania, an acrylic painting from Yuendumu, a rock painting at Oenpelli, a document like the Barunga Statement or a laser-copied polaroid, it contains an element of cultural activism and expression that is informed by living in Australia now and is essential to the dialogue of conciliation (Yunupingu, in Fink & Perkins, 1997, p. 63).

Stanislavsky (1938, p. 121) wrote "everybody can act, everybody does act, but not everyone can be an actor". Similarly, utilising the arts in teaching and learning does not require students or facilitators who are painters or performers. We are not aiming for the prettiest drawing or best dancer – it is the understandings

the student engages with in producing the work that is important. Similarly, in relation to Indigenous Australian "art" practices the whole of a community may be considered as artists in that they inherit designs that they will recreate as part of cultural learning and passing on knowledge processes, regardless of any perceived "painting" ability (Coleman, 2004, p. 237). This is not to negate or deny the aesthetic beauty and appeal of works by Indigenous Australian artists. The rationale for looking at incorporating the arts in teaching Indigenous Australian studies is for the purpose of finding some common ground in which to begin meaningful dialogues within mainstream education. It is to acknowledge and attempt to understand better the complex system of knowledge management and safeguarding of information through the various sources continuously used by Indigenous Australians and to challenge the myth that mainstream education is in anyway "higher" or more "dominant" than other systems. We need to be able to create "safe" positions from which Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians can participate respectfully in relation to Indigenous Australian studies in order to further advance the pathways into quality education created by those who have gone before us.

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