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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS *on the* CENTRAL ROLE *of* INDIGENOUS PROGRAM FACILITATORS *in* EDUCATION *for* SOCIAL CHANGE

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■ Abstract

This paper is based on my reflections as an Indigenous academic, working at the coalface with Indigenous students in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology Sydney. These reflections are informed through my experience of designing, facilitating and teaching a block-mode program developed specifically for Indigenous Australians – the Bachelor of Arts in Community Management and Adult Education. I speak to the challenges of developing appropriate programs for Indigenous Australians attempting to effect social change on the ground in communities and community organisations. The underlying principles, considerations, and effective strategies for program design and delivery are described. These highlight the complex role of facilitators who must manage the interface between Indigenous community contexts and knowledge, those of academic knowledge and institutional practices, and the needs of Indigenous students as learners and future professionals.

■ Introduction

By all social and economic measures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised as the most disadvantaged group within Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1994; Cunningham et al., 2005). This is evidenced in all sectors of society from employment to housing and to educational attainment. In terms of social justice, education is viewed as being a conduit for social change and advancing Indigenous people in their quest for self-determination (HREOC, 2005). Accordingly, education that provides for a foundation for the future whilst recognising and respecting our rich cultural history is paramount to all Australians and Australian society (Lennon, 2001). Sound education can effect sound social change (Donnelly, 2004). However, whilst this may be an ideal principle, where education for Indigenous people is not underpinned by effective pedagogy or does not account for any significant epistemic differences that emerge between Indigenous and Western knowledge and practices, then teaching practice is unlikely to achieve such educational or social goals. I suggest that Indigenous education for social change requires the development and delivery of education programs at the post-compulsory level, which are practitioner-centered. By that, I mean programs that are focused on the needs of those who are already working toward social change via their particular work or professional practice or who are undertaking study to do so. What “sound” education for “sound” social change looks like needs to be more fully explored, understood, described and discussed in terms of program, subject and lesson design for this group of Indigenous tertiary students. From my experience developing programs and teaching in the field of Indigenous community management and development, it is particularly important that program facilitators to reflect critically and systematically on their practice and to enlarge their professional knowledge.

The tensions between Indigenous and Western perspectives present challenges which have largely emerged in approaches to program development and program delivery and are further reflected in

the differing notions placed on cultural ideals and constructs which support Indigenous values and cultures. In working between these tensions, an important aspect of providing practitioner-centered programs is the need for comprehensive student support throughout the period of study. Education in this context should not just be about what happens in the classroom but a whole-of-institution approach to supporting Indigenous studies and students. Student support and after-class follow-up is integral to maintaining student academic progression and overall well-being. Thus, this “more hidden” aspect of programs is integral to sustaining a coherent relationship between the student and the academy and to providing both an enriching and engaging experience for the student and the academy.

At the centre of this is the role of the Indigenous program facilitator who must work across the disjunction between academic and Indigenous contexts. In this paper, I reflect upon my own practice in the frame of community management and development education for Australia’s first peoples, share with you some of my experiences, and provide some recommendations for useful and successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-compulsory education for adult learners.

■ Considerations for quality program design and delivery

In my experience, a number of areas have to be considered and worked on by facilitators to deliver good programs for social change. These include understanding the broader context that informs teaching and learning practices; identification of the types of teaching modes and/or strategies and resources that are known to work well; including both academic and pastoral support measures; the role of community participation and collaboration; and, the importance of student feedback for review.

Setting the broad approach to teaching and learning

Approaches to teaching and learning need to be culturally and socially appropriate and reflective of emerging industry trends that support a social just development agenda. This means contextualising programs within the broader university structure and the Western academic context in a way that upholds Indigenous values and identified concerns. However, approaches to teaching and learning must do more. They need to understand the context in which Indigenous student-practitioners work. Teaching and curricula needs to connect with what students know from their experience in community and/or management so that Indigenous experience and knowledge and academic knowledge can be reflected in programs in a critical but useful way.

My approach to teaching and learning in our program is firstly underscored by the following values and principles:

- Understanding the social, cultural, political and economic context where community organisations and Indigenous people are located;
- Placing priorities on identifying, locating and using sources of information regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander management and community development issues;
- Recognising and understanding existing and emerging issues and trends in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander management – locally, nationally and internationally;
- Appreciating the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemology and forms of organisation, and developing cogent pedagogy that underscores these values;
- Forming mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups, academics and students;
- Understanding the nature and scope of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (see Nakata, 2007);
- Utilising educational processes to resolve issues that inhibit social, cultural, educational and economic development for Indigenous peoples;
- Appreciating and extolling the role of community and self-determination in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; and
- Formalising and upholding a position for the School and Faculty and various university bodies in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, employment, and Reconciliation.

Identifying strategies that work

Some of the strategies I have developed or worked towards to influence, motivate and inspire students in their learning are as follows:

- Using pedagogical research to influence the preparation of culturally appropriate course materials and the creation of teaching aids in the community management field. These are critically important. One must maintain constant vigilance to ensure materials are culturally appropriate, accessible and contribute to the learning experience for the student. This can be done by checking with sources within and outside the university. There have been some instances over the last few years where material has been inappropriate. Board of Aboriginal Studies or the equivalent can recommend reading guides. Similarly, most universities have academics and support staff who can collaborate to ensure appropriate materials are used.

- Using pedagogical research has also led to the development of assessment and self-directed learning activities that encourage and inspire students to learn by distance (see Dyson et al., 2007). Developing assessment and self-directed learning activities that encourage and inspire students to learn at home with minimal supervision is quite different from day classes. These differences between the on-campus and distance modes need to be reflected in Subject Outlines, which should have clear and defined learning and assessment activities that can be achieved with minimal supervision at home.
- Developing specific subjects to address self-determination in Indigenous education and development and moves us towards community control.
- Informing academics' expectations and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student performance. I work closely and constantly with other teachers and support staff involved in our programs to ensure that there is an aspect of cross-cultural development for non-Indigenous academics, so they are enabled and supported in the class in order to best facilitate education and learning for the students. As part of this goal, for the last three years our head community management teacher has participated on interstate field trips with Indigenous students to Indigenous communities and community organisations throughout the country.
- Working with individual student's communities to ensure ethical and fair processes are in place for students, which reflect the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Reconciliation Statement and ethics and research guidelines.
- Finding solutions to socio-economic factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their education. Where students have issues, I work closely with Student Services to ensure they have appropriate support, such as counselling, resolution of financial problems or the provision of computer facilities. This often involves my working with Commonwealth and State funded Aboriginal education support systems, such as Abstudy to make sure that students are accessing appropriate payments, to assist with their living costs while studying, personally negotiating for scholarships for Indigenous community management students.
- Understanding Indigenous ways of learning and knowing (Hughes et al., 2004).

There may also be strategies applicable to specific areas of teaching and learning. On-going discussion with lecturers, students, and respective communities is always highly recommended to help identify such strategies.

In sum, it can be seen how program development, teaching, pedagogy, learning, and support for both

students and non-Indigenous academics are all closely intertwined and integral to students' progress. It can also be seen how important the broader context in which programs are implemented must first be considered. Many practical and organisational issues impact on students and weave through into the quality of learning experiences. This is in part about organisational change and practice for academics and the institution. A report on this type of reform was conducted in the vocational educational sector, and resulted in a number of reforms to policy and services (Balatti & Goldman, 2003). The role of the program facilitator is critical in managing and implementing changes and the task requires sensitivity but determination to make sure change is inclusive of everyone involved.

Community participation and collaboration in learning

Indigenous community participation and learning process are a vital and important part of education, particularly where management and development are the key themes. Understanding communities as a context for culture and family life, including community results, community capacity and social capital, are not separate to an Indigenous way of living, being and knowing. These remain central to Indigenous adult learners' experiences that they bring in to the classroom. Given this, when engaging with communities, at all times the facilitator should ensure ethical and fair processes are in place for students, and their respective communities. These should reflect any broader commitments of the institution, for example, in our case, the UTS Reconciliation Statement and ethics and research guidelines (see Shibasaki et al., 2000).

Education which supports self-determination in Indigenous education towards community control is invaluable. This is not just about Indigenous people, it is about a global approach to management-development and education. Hence, program facilitators have to be able to develop collaborative practices with communities and interface as well with the university. My teaching practices are underpinned by a coherent pedagogy, which is practitioner-centred. At the centre of this pedagogy is the principle of collaboration in learning: working and walking together. For my practice, this has meant work across the Indigenous community and across the university. This includes:

- Ongoing collaboration with Indigenous people to develop and implement in educational programs/courses/subjects that recognise Australian Indigenous people, knowledge and experience, particularly as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community development.

- Increasing the representation of Indigenous staff and students throughout the University, through the active implementation of the Aboriginal Education Strategy and the Wingara Employment Strategy. I am an active member of both committees.
- Participating in committees and processes.
- Continuing to develop a supportive organisational culture which values and respects Indigenous culture and accommodates cultural differences wherever possible within the University's and Faculty of Business' policies and practices. This includes cross-cultural activities to raise awareness with staff and students on issues that support and promote Indigenous culture and knowledge.
- Supporting activities and programs in the Faculty of Business and across faculties that explore contemporary social justice issues, such as the initiation of the UTS Library Forum series, where in 2007 the focus was on the 1967 Referendum and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' roles in this.
- Supporting activities and programs that foster communication and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, students and community members.
- Establishing relationships with Indigenous staff, students and community members based on the principles of self-determination, social justice, equal partnership, and equity. This is achieved by including Indigenous case-studies, guest speakers and teachers into mainstream subjects.
- Promoting across the broader community awareness and appreciation of Australia's Indigenous heritage, and the importance of protection and preservation of significant Indigenous sites across the land. This is achieved by maintaining relationships with local land councils and native title groups (see for example, Board of Studies, NSW, 2001).

More specifically, collaborative practice has to be demonstrable in classroom activities when students are on-campus. To this end, we pursue a program of guest speakers. For example, Indigenous researchers in centres such as Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning are enlisted to discuss the latest developments in policy or law that may have an impact on Indigenous livelihoods.

As well, we constantly develop and use community engagement strategies to draw in community perspectives. In this regard I work directly with community, government and other educational institutions to ensure the maximum involvement of Indigenous community at all levels and across all sectors – public, private, government and community. Most of our lecturers have industry contacts as well. It is also worthwhile considering community-based organisations as a way of expanding the engagement portfolio.

Facilitation of community engagement in and outside the classroom is also demonstrated and realised through a number of subjects where students and staff consult, negotiate and engage in the community sector by way of field trips to actual communities.

■ Student feedback

Student feedback plays an invaluable part of the ongoing engagement with students, the community and the University. It also helps to shape the context of student support and student learning. In this regard, my work in the Faculty of Business requires that I regularly undertake student feedback surveys for purposes of reflecting on my teaching and also the content and context of teaching and learning materials. This review and reflection has led to many of the strategies I have already outlined – upgrading in reading material, introduction of topical and inspiring guest speakers, and the robust engagement with community organisations, such as field trips to regional, rural and remote communities – taking the students into the community classroom.

Using feedback has also assisted in fostering independent learning by creating a student-centred learning environment, thus creating opportunities for students to self-identify areas of learning, and creatively involve them in the development of community-generated and inspired responses to community issues. This is as they themselves, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of large extended families and communities see the issues. Student feedback in this regard provides the opportunity for me as a teacher to understand more deeply how the students see what is affecting their learning, development and community engagement. It also is a wonderful opportunity to create spaces for the students to develop and grasp opportunities where they lead from the front.

Some specific outcomes from incorporating student's insights into their learning have included:

- Setting assignments that reflect cultural, social, and industry practices and standards;
- Presenting assignments where students can work from their own community;
- Negotiating and developing learning contracts with students that have direct self and community outcomes;
- Encouraging peer support through group work learning activities. These activities are embedded in the learning activity and provided off-campus through the development of a Koori Toastmasters group that I have instituted with World Vision Australia (Indigenous Programs);
- Mentoring one on one with students in developing projects and community activities. This is evidenced with my work with students particularly involved in Aboriginal Women's Projects, such as *Black*

out violence which won the NSW Premiers Award for Community, and *Sexual abuse is not our way*, which was nominated for the 2006 UTS Human Rights Award; and

- Providing specific skills development in academic and research skills, which are embedded in subjects where UTS Library is an integral part of the subject.

■ Conclusion

Working in and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is not an easy path in teaching in community management and development studies. However, if we are to move towards furthering the goal of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations, we need to look at the development, delivery and provision of education and what this means to students and communities. Development and learning do not occur in isolation or separate from one another. The process of sound community development, which is evidence-based, is strongly linked to how and what students learn and, more importantly, how knowledge and skills acquired from the academy are utilised at the community level. Learning institutions in this regard have both a moral and social duty to ensure that this happens responsibly.

My experience strongly suggests that what we do as Indigenous educators is critical to building our Indigenous students' capacities and skills to effect social changes in their organisations and communities on the ground. We as educators and program facilitators must be in a constant process of critical reflection on our own practices in program design and delivery to ensure we respond to our communities' needs. If we ask our students to engage in a process of using their educational opportunities to critically reflect on their own practices on the ground in community contexts, then we must be prepared to always do the same with regard to what we do in post-compulsory programs. For us as educators, this means we must be well connected to our communities, to our colleagues in universities and the ongoing development of academic scholarship, and to our networks in the broader industry sectors. Most importantly, we must remain connected to our Indigenous students who bring their experience and knowledge into the academic domain. We must respect their feedback and their needs and support them in all the areas that impact on their learning. After all, if the goal of education is to equip our students to implement practices that will improve the Indigenous social context, then the least we can do is make sure we keep improving the context in which they learn. The Indigenous program facilitator's role must be at the centre managing and drawing all of this together.

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