

**Cultural pedagogy online: exploring the experiences, challenges and
benefits of online learning within Aboriginal contexts for
undergraduates.**

Gail Kaylene Tillman

B Adult Ed (University of Technology)

B Ed (Australian Catholic University)

Grad Cert in Indigenous Research and Leadership (University of Melbourne)

M Adult Ed (University of Technology)

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this thesis may contain
images and names of deceased persons.

Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material that has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the university's digital repository, subject to the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968* and any approved embargo.

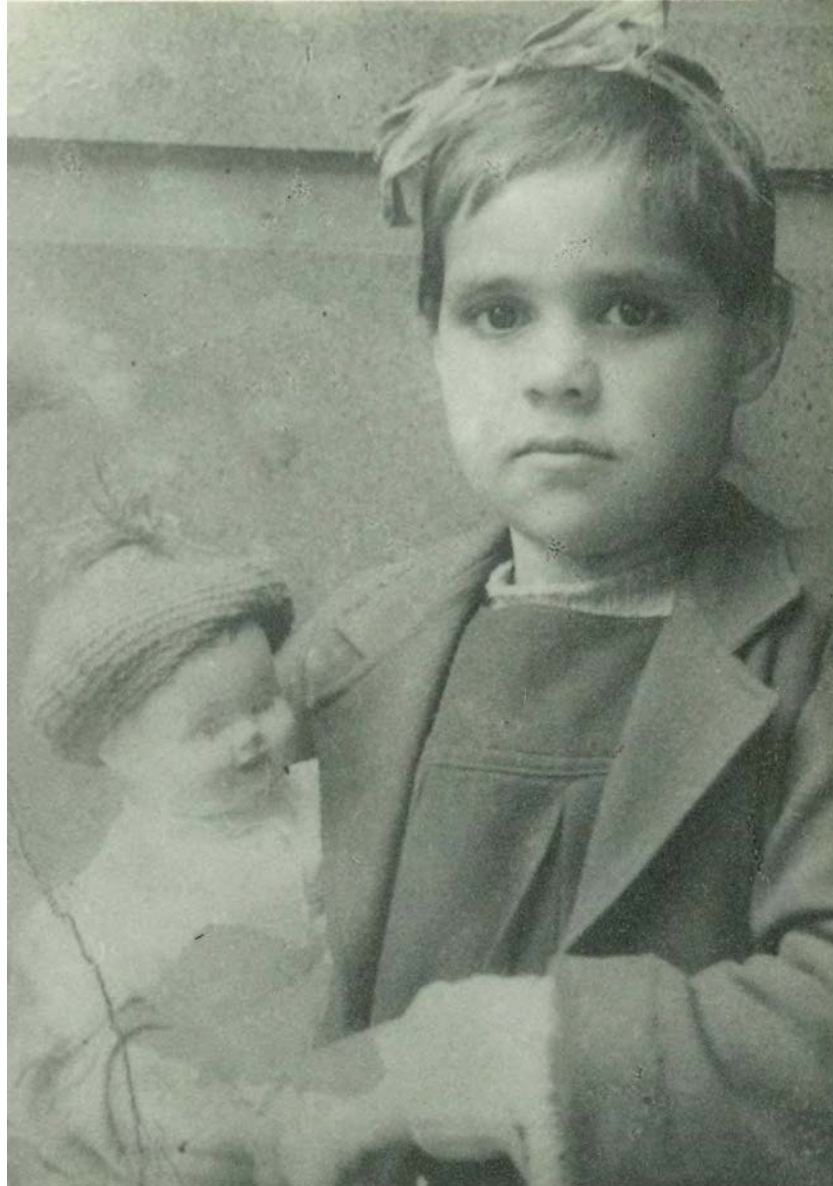
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Signed: _____ *Gail Tillman* _____

Gail Tillman

Dedication

In loving memory, I dedicate this research to my mother, Patricia, to whom I owe everything, and who was with me in every word I wrote.



Abstract

This research centres on learning for professional practice with a diverse student cohort enrolled in online courses at the Wollotuka Institute (Wollotuka) at the University of Newcastle. Most students who learn within Wollotuka are non-Indigenous, studying through Wollotuka as part of undergraduate degrees leading to careers in professions such as teaching, allied health and social work. While online learning is becoming increasingly widespread, there has been little research on the educational potential of cultural pedagogy online. This research examines: (i) the experiences of students and teachers of online learning within Aboriginal contexts, (ii) the benefits and challenges of students learning this material online (iii) how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students reflect on their increasing knowledge and confidence in Aboriginal cultural contexts? The research responds to these questions by engaging with online cultural learning and teaching experiences of students and teaching staff at Wollotuka. Students in three first-year online courses responded to surveys and shared reflective journal assessment tasks. Data collected provided rich insights into students' experiences of engaging in learning online. Teaching staff engaging in Yarning sessions shared experiences of their cultural pedagogy through that process. The thesis finds Wollotuka Institute's online cultural educators played a significant role in students experiencing a rich and diverse learning journey through transformative learning experiences. This comprised the sharing of vital Indigenous knowledges within a learning narrative deeply connected to epistemologies of place. Wollotuka's educators were able to share their unique style of cultural pedagogy and their lived experiences with students. However, learning motivation and course engagement was needed to establish and maintain course success and rich learning experiences. These required students to overcome initial online learning challenges to achieve positive online learning experiences. The findings have significance for the higher education sector nationally, in particular, for initiatives aimed at re-envisioning of online learning design into a contextual practice, one that positions Indigenous culture at the forefront of online teaching and learning.

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I begin by acknowledging Worimi Country where I live, where most of this thesis was written and Awabakal Country where this research was undertaken. I pay my respects to their Elders, both past, present and emerging, while acknowledging all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have walked before me, enabling me to undertake this incredibly empowering journey.

With deep gratitude and humility, I acknowledge the students who selflessly gave permission for me to access their personal reflections for this research. Without their generous contributions and personal insights, this would have been a vastly different thesis. It is a privilege to have become part of your learning journey.

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To my former Wollotuka Institute colleagues who participated in the Yarning sessions, this is for you. To my cultural mentor, Michael, immense gratitude. To Amy, for empowering me with strength and resilience when I needed it the most, and my PhD buddy, Vicki, for listening patiently to my endless rants. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the Wollotuka Institute, which gave me my first teaching opportunity in higher education all those years ago and was instrumental in delegating the task of creating its first online course. I thank my family—the sacrifices were real and difficult to endure.

A legacy for my children—Natasha, Elinor, Shane and Tim—and grandchildren: Tia, Bonnie, Chester, Frankie and Charlie.

I also thank the wonderful community in which I live, with particular affection and respect for Aunty Val, who accepted me when I first moved into this area, 33 years ago, re-

igniting my cultural journey, which grounded me in my cultural identity. For that, I will be forever grateful! I apologise if I have missed anyone.

In the words of Anita Heiss (2012) *'I'm Aboriginal. I'm just not the Aboriginal person a lot of people want or expect me to be'*. It's okay to be me.

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Glossary

Aboriginal/ Indigenous Australian person: Aboriginal, mainly refers to Aboriginal Australians in New South Wales (NSW). Term is used in accordance with the advice of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc (NSW AECG). Indigenous, used by Australian government organisations in Australia and also refers to First Nations people, the First People of Australia and both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal Studies: Describes inquiry relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, cultures and histories which impact upon Indigenous peoples and communities. Includes embedded Indigenous perspectives into university courses or as a ‘standalone’ Aboriginal Studies course. This term also includes Australian Indigenous Studies

Australian Tertiary Admission Rank: The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student’s position relative to all students in their age group (i.e., all 16–20-year-olds in New South Wales’ Universities Admissions Centre, 2020).

Conversations in the corridor: Refers to the day-to-day Yarning encountered with colleagues at the Wollotuka Institute: the exchange of conversations and ideas resulting in affirmations of pedagogy, culture and identity within the confines of the teaching and learning space.

Cultural competence: Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples. (Universities Australia, 2011a, p. 6). It is a level which has no endpoint.

Cultural educators: Refers to the Aboriginal teachers within the Wollotuka Institute.

Cultural practitioners: Refers to Australian Indigenous cultural teachers within higher education in a national context.

Cultural learning: Refers to styles of learning, and includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander embedded perspectives.

Cultural pedagogy: Refers to an educational pedagogy, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers who share their lived experiences and embed it into their teaching. It becomes part of their cultural teaching identity.

Cultural practice: Refers to ways of teaching within an Aboriginal Studies paradigm

Cultural practitioners: Refers to Indigenous teachers involved in higher education within a national context.

Cultural standards: A set of generalised cultural norms related to teaching, including commonly shared beliefs about what is acceptable and unacceptable

Cultural Standards: Refers to the Wollotuka Institute set of cultural guidelines to reflect and embrace the cultural essence to which their objectives are directed. It also informs the relationships with students, community and the University.

Cultural teaching: Refers to teaching/embedding Indigenous knowledges into teaching practices.

Digital learning: Includes online learning, blended learning and e-Learning. It also includes ‘offline digital learning’, such as using local software and digital cameras.

Ethical research: *The AIATSIS Act (1989)* mandates AIATSIS to provide leadership in the field of ethics and protocols for research related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and collections. The AIATSIS ethics framework is underpinned by the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (Ethical Research, 2015).

Experiential learning: Term used in relation to learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Indigenising the curriculum: Connecting cultural learning content to suit local culture, then adapting it to fit in with the whole-of-university teaching and learning approach.

Places Indigenous standpoints at the centre of Indigenous curricula and protects the unique methodological, epistemological and pedagogical features of Indigenous Studies.

Indigenous knowledge/s: Refers to knowledge embedded in the ways that Aboriginal peoples live their daily. It is performative. It is the understandings of knowledge based on the social, physical and spiritual understandings which have informed Australian Indigenous people's survival and contributed to their sense of being in the world.

Intercultural experience: Experiencing interactions with individuals/groups of people whose culture is different from your own. This includes differences in cultural values that are different from one's own culture (McCuen@aacu.org, 2014).

Online learning: Preferred term used in this research and the term used by the University of Newcastle. Online learning is characterised by constant changes and rapid innovation in online teaching and learning strategies (ACODE, 2013). It may also encompass e-learning and blended learning.

Truth-telling: Refers to promoting awareness of the historical and ongoing impact of past actions. Gaining an honest and full understanding of colonisation, and the dispossession and trauma that Indigenous peoples were subjected to in the following years.

Working with Aboriginal community/peoples: This may include, recognising and acknowledging cultural terms which must be adhered to when engaging with Aboriginal peoples. These may include, Elders, Aboriginal peoples in the community who are holders of cultural wisdom and knowledge, Aunties and Uncles, in recognising their status within community and the vital role they play, Kinship, refers to Aboriginal kinship structures within Aboriginal communities

Cultural Terminology Guide

There is no universally agreed upon terminology for referring to the many diverse groups who comprise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Thus, in this thesis, I refer to the cultural terminology guide, *Narragunnawali: A Guide to Using Respectful and Inclusive Language and Terminology*, from Reconciliation Australia (2018). This cultural guide states:

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation and strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community ... language is itself active, and can impact on attitudes, understandings and relationships in a very real and active sense ... It is best practice to use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when referring generally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Aboriginal' (and less commonly accepted variants such as 'Aboriginals' or 'Aborigines') alone is also not inclusive of the diversity of cultures and identities across Australia, for which reason it should be accompanied by 'peoples' in the plural*. Similarly, as a standalone term, 'Aboriginal' is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples, and reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be spelt out where the intention is to refer to all First Peoples of Australia. Pluralised reference terms such as 'First Peoples' or 'First Nations' are also acceptable language, and respectfully encompass the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities. (Reconciliation Australia, 2018)

As such, I use the terms 'Aboriginal or Aboriginal peoples' in this research. This is consistent with usage at the Wollotuka Institute and the University of Newcastle more widely (University of Newcastle, Australia, 2020).