



VIEWPOINT

Aboriginal enabling pedagogies and approaches in Australia: Centring and decolonising our approaches

Sharlene Leroy-Dyer*

The University of Newcastle, Australia

This viewpoint paper draws on my experiences as an Aboriginal educator/academic and highlights my current research involving a literature review on the intersection of enabling education¹ and Aboriginal pedagogies, with the express aim of developing an Aboriginal enabling pedagogy for use in the Australian higher education sector.² I would like to begin by acknowledging country. This is an important protocol that precedes activities that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I would like to acknowledge that this paper was written on the lands of the Awabakal³ people. I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples over these lands and pay my respects to the elders past, present and future, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of Aboriginal Australia. I would like to acknowledge the loss of lands, cultures and treasures, and highlight the damaging consequences of this loss for the people, communities and nations. Reconciliation is a belief that we can walk together to a better future. However, we must remember that under the concrete and asphalt, this land is, was and will always be traditional Aboriginal land.

Personal context

My name is Sharlene Leroy-Dyer; I am a Guringai⁴/Gadigal⁵/Dhurag⁶/Wiradjuri⁷ woman, born on Gadigal land and raised in Dhurag country. I now live on the land of the Awabakal people where I convene the Yapug program at the University of Newcastle (UON). I am considered an early career academic, having completed my PhD in 2016, despite being a researcher and practitioner for the past fourteen years, ten of which as a practitioner in enabling education. I

¹ In the Australian context, 'enabling' refers to programs in higher education that are intended to widen access to university for under-represented and disadvantaged groups, particularly identified equity groups (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

² The literature review is also being developed to inform a larger Indigenous Australian Research Council Discovery grant application, which will develop and pilot a national Indigenous enabling education approach that can be utilised Australia wide.

³ Awabakal territory spreads, north, from the Hunter River to the southern extremities of Lake Macquarie, or the Tuggerah Lake, in the south. The western boundary is the Sugarloaf Range and the Watagan Mountains.

⁴ The Guringai people are the traditional custodians of the land now reserved as the Garigal National Park.

⁵ The traditional owners of the Sydney City region are the Gadigal people. Their land south of Port Jackson stretches from South Head to Petersham.

⁶ Dhurag peoples are the largest group of Aboriginal people in the Sydney region whose lands ranged from coastal Sydney to the Blue Mountains.

⁷ The Wiradjuri are the largest Aboriginal group in New South Wales. They occupy a large area in central New South Wales, from the Blue Mountains in the east, to Hay in the west, north to Nyngan and south to Albury.

hold a PhD in Management from the University of Newcastle, a Bachelor of Business (Hons) from the University of Newcastle, and a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Research and Leadership from the University of Melbourne. I consider myself an Aboriginal activist. I am a left-winged socialist and I am passionate about 'closing the gap' on the educational and employment disadvantage that my people, the Aboriginal people of Australia, face. However, the Closing the Gap campaign is problematic, because it "focuses on the needs of government rather than the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ... and highlights problems rather than strengths" (Markham & Biddle, 2017). In addition, I do not consider myself an Australian, as this term is for the colonised and I refuse to fit into this paradigm; I will decolonise every space that I am able to. With this stance in mind, the viewpoint you are reading is a reflection of my current and emerging practice and my current and emerging research. My review of literature on approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies and how they can be implemented into programs within universities is part of my decolonisation project.

Program context

Yapug is the Awabakal word for path, and as such it is a pathway or enabling program designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gain study skills and a tertiary ranking for entry into undergraduate degrees at the University of Newcastle. Yapug is also accepted as an entry qualification to many other universities in Australia. The Yapug program was introduced at the University of Newcastle in 1999 as a pathway into health-related professions. Since 2001, Yapug has offered entry paths to a wide range of study areas. The program is run jointly by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Wollotuka Institute and is physically located within Wollotuka. As with all enabling programs, attrition rates are high, however, over the 20 years of the program 161 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have graduated. There has been a significant trend for those graduates to go into Health, Medicine, Teaching and Social Sciences.

Aboriginal pedagogy

Pedagogy is a term that is used to describe the relationships and "interactions between teachers, students and the learning environment and the learning tasks" (Murphy, 2009, p. 35). It describes the approaches and methods that teachers use to assist student learning. The differences between teaching and pedagogy are outlined by Alexander (2008) who emphasises that "teaching is an act while pedagogy is both act and discourse ... Pedagogy connects the apparently self-contained act of teaching with culture, structure and mechanisms of social control" (p. 6). This is an important definition that I draw on when reflecting on Aboriginal pedagogy, as pedagogy is not simply describing the activity of teaching, it reflects the social and cultural values within the learning relationship (Willis, 2012) and in the institutional settings where teaching and learning take place.

There is considerable literature on pedagogy, however, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to Aboriginal pedagogies and approaches in Australia (although see Yunkaporta, 2009; El-Ayoubi, 2004; Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Carnes, 2015; Hughes & More, 1997), and to my knowledge no literature that focuses on Aboriginal 'enabling' pedagogy. In other countries with First Nations peoples, such as Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand, pedagogic research and scholarly literature is growing but these fields are culturally specific to those nations, however I will draw from them to inform my project that reviews existing literature about Aboriginal pedagogies and approaches, as well as investigating literature on the broader enabling space, that will contribute to the development of an understanding of Aboriginal enabling pedagogies.

An important part of this research is to consider the extent of documented differences between Indigenous and dominant western pedagogies, as well as the gaps in knowledge and practice. Indigenous research design and methodology are utilised for the review. That is, Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing (epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies) are utilised in conjunction with a critical Indigenous lens. For Aboriginal teachers and students, the pedagogical space is important – it needs to be a space that is “culturally safe, respectful and conducive to shared learning” and is influenced by “formal and informal cultural learning” (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008, p. 150). Biermann and Townsend-Cross (2008) emphasise utilising yarning circles that are non-hierarchical structures holding all participants to account for speaking and listening, and are symbolic of this approach. Assessments need to emphasise reflectiveness, and class discussions “reflect the whole learning experience of content, process and purpose” (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008, p. 150). Aboriginal pedagogical approaches relate to identity and relatedness and are contained in the values of “reciprocity, inclusiveness, nurturance and respect” (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008, p. 150). A snapshot of the pedagogical principles and approaches we use in the Yapug program, based on Aboriginal approaches to teaching and learning, are as follows:

- Aboriginal pedagogy is the understanding of Aboriginal knowledge, Aboriginal ways of learning, Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing and our worldviews.
- Aboriginal pedagogy is different to mainstream pedagogy. The key differences being the outlook and the whole of life approach, the connection to the land, and the importance of family and identity.
- Aboriginal perspectives are not found in Aboriginal content, but in Aboriginal processes.
- Aboriginal pedagogy attaches value to localised and traditional knowledge.
- Aboriginal pedagogy is about telling stories, and it’s also about being listened to in a respectful way in a safe space, so it allows a different way of learning. This way of learning is tied to ‘The Eight-way Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework’ developed by Yunkaporta (2009).⁸
- We tie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ sense of community and storytelling to the subjects being learned.
- We connect the curriculum to Aboriginal storytelling and dreaming stories and explain how it relates to their community.
- Aboriginal pedagogy is hands-on learning.
- We recognise/know that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have different motivations for attending university than non-Indigenous students – for many it is about gaining skills so we can give back to our communities.
- We avoid holding a lecture and a tutorial, instead we hold interactive workshops utilising yarning and yarning circles, so students apply the knowledge being learnt and relate that back to their communities, to kinship, to Aboriginal Lore, to family and to connection to country. However, if a student is taking an elective from one of the other enabling programs, they are exposed to lectures and tutorials.

The goals of the Yapug program have been developed and redeveloped over time, and have adapted to the changing needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that we service. It is extremely important that the goals of the program reflect and are developed in consultation with these communities. Those goals are: that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learn in a supportive, culturally appropriate environment; that Aboriginal and Torres

⁸ The Eight-way Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework (Yunkaporta, 2009) was developed to assist teachers in understanding and acknowledging Aboriginal knowledges and bringing them to the classroom.

Strait Islander students are aware of *and* proud of their cultural identity; and to differentiate the program from the other enabling programs at UON. In order to articulate this differentiation, in conjunction with our local Aboriginal community, we developed a Yapug Philosophy as outlined below:

- We acknowledge the work inherited from our ancestors and those who walked before us; in doing so we look back to look forward; working collectively for the good of our peoples;
- That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learn in a supportive, culturally appropriate, safe and stable environment that values our culture;
- That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are aware of their cultural identity; and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, pedagogies and knowledges are embedded into teaching practices;
- That we reframe history and challenge the stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- That we unlock the leadership potential in our students; acknowledging the students' aspirations whatever they may be;
- That our worldviews are acknowledged, accepted and valued.

It is important that Aboriginal pedagogies are placed at the centre of all teaching within the Yapug program that is why all teaching staff are Aboriginal. What we bring to this space is our history, politics, discourses, social practices and knowledges; it is how we come to understand our everyday world and our cultural knowledge. The learning and teaching methods used in the Yapug Program are outlined in the Cultural Standards of the Wollotuka Institute, which inform the Institute's relationships with students, the community and the university. The Cultural Standards provide a set of principles and standards against which the cultural integrity of the Wollotuka Institute is monitored, reviewed and assessed. The Wollotuka Institute Cultural Standards are structured to recognise and respectfully acknowledge the cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013).

Decolonising pedagogy

Along with the movement to decolonise research (e.g. Smith, 1999), through which white, European researchers have historically objectified Indigenous peoples, in recent years there has also been a move to problematise the Western-centric nature of curriculum, course content, and teaching methodologies. Aboriginal pedagogy is therefore tied to decolonisation, because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not have a voice and were 'dehumanised' in education (Hook, 2013, Nichol, 2011, Wyld, 2007 & Porsanger, 2004). Furthermore, the academic world has not been welcoming to Aboriginal ways of thinking, understanding and approaching knowledge, partly as these approaches are not considered to belong to existing theory. However, Aboriginal theories do exist, they are a derivative of '*what it means to be Aboriginal*' constructed from national struggles embedded in the human and civil rights movements. Aboriginal academics have developed theories that focus on decolonising and reframing pedagogies that enable Aboriginal voices to be heard, and to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to learn (Bennett, Power, Thomson, Mason, & Bartleet, 2016; Wyld, 2007).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold a unique position in Australian society, yet they are the most disadvantaged group in the community. This disadvantage is a direct result of the effects of European invasion and the systematic exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples from many institutions of Australian society, such as education systems. (Leroy-Dyer, 2016). NAPLAN data shows that across all years, on average Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve significantly lower scores than their non-Indigenous peers and have the lowest Year 12 attainment rates (Teach Learn Grow Inc., 2018). The Yapug program and others like it across Australia are contributing to 'closing the gap' on educational disadvantage, by providing programs that are culturally appropriate, and which embed Aboriginal enabling pedagogical approaches within the curriculum to address historical disadvantage, misrecognition and cultural ignorance, and to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel welcome in higher education settings and can thrive in their chosen studies.

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