

The Transformative Potential of Southern SoTL for Australian Indigenous Studies.

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Abstract

The complex problem of how students learn in Indigenous Studies and what they find most challenging has recently gained new importance for Australian tertiary educators. A new Indigenous strategy, released by the peak body Universities Australia, has indicated that all university curricula should include Indigenous perspectives. This short paper touches briefly on this potentially pivotal development in Australian Higher Education, foreshadows a learning and teaching project I am currently undertaking, and outlines why SoTL in the South is timely and crucial to advancing the contributions Indigenous scholars are already making to the field in general and to social justice education more specifically.

What do students find most challenging when they are first learning in Indigenous Studies? This is a complex question – explored rather than answered in this paper - even before we consider possible answers. Which students? In Australia students could be local non-Indigenous, local Indigenous, or international, which could include students who are Indigenous to other countries. Learners could be mature aged or just out of secondary education. What Indigenous Studies? A major area of study, sequenced carefully, leading to a level of discipline expertise; or more commonly a single subject in a degree with varying degrees of relevance to the main discipline of study? I have previously suggested that this kind of question sits squarely in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) frame (Page 2014). The question could be rhetorical; the sort of question we might ponder while drowning in a sea of uninspiring first year papers. What makes it SoTL is the potential to be researched, the connection to enhanced practice and the possible contribution to field (Boyer, 1990).

It's not surprising that students might find Indigenous Studies difficult. As teachers of Indigenous Studies we flinch at student resistance, we wince at racism and occasionally we cry at their insensitivity. In short, we sometimes find teaching emotional and difficult (Asmar & Page 2009). In this short, reflective and somewhat meandering piece I will touch briefly on a recent and potentially pivotal development in Australian Higher Education, foreshadow a learning and teaching project I am currently undertaking, and outline why SoTL in the South is timely and crucial to advancing the contributions Indigenous scholars are already making to the field in general and to social justice education more specifically.

Teaching becomes scholarship when the work we do as teachers becomes public, is critiqued through peer-review, and communicated with other members of our professional communities to foster further development of our work (Schulman, 2000). The question of student learning in Indigenous Studies sits both comfortably and uncomfortably in the domain of SoTL in the South. Indigenous Studies is clearly relevant to Southern theory, concerned as it is with race, privilege and power. However, in the recent research that I have been undertaking, exploring student learning in Indigenous Studies, I have always felt a tension between a desire to teach for better learning, and undertaking research focusing on the largely non-Indigenous students who are the majority of learners in Indigenous Studies. Although this tension remains unresolved, some recent developments in Australia Higher Education bring the question, and its potential for illuminating learning, into sharper focus. All Australian universities have recently agreed to ensure all students "encounter and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural content as integral parts of their course of study, by 2020" (Universities Australia, 2017, 14). However, as the overwhelming majority of students in Australian universities are non-Indigenous (whether domestic or international) it will be vital to harness all the relevant research to date and continue to pursue fresh research to ensure that this opportunity, to engage students in Indigenous Studies and address the ongoing inequities of colonialism, is maximised.

The *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020*, launched by the peak body Universities Australia, builds on a commitment made some years ago by the Deans of Medicine who collectively took steps to ensure that medical graduates were better prepared to contribute to improving

Indigenous Australian health as well as providing better services to Indigenous communities (Phillips 2004). Universities have agreed that learning more about Indigenous Australian history and the ongoing legacies of colonisation in Indigenous communities will reinforce the capacity of the nation's future service providers, and professionals to work effectively in Indigenous contexts. Many universities are already making efforts in this area with some introducing cultural awareness modules that all students must complete before graduation for example (University of Western Australia for example). Others have introduced compulsory Indigenous Studies subjects. Ambitious institutions have attempted whole of institution change (see for example Anning, 2010) with varying degrees of success.

A narrow, isolated focus on curriculum change through embedding Indigenous perspectives suggests that the curriculum we need is just waiting to slot into place and that the space in the curriculum will be unreservedly available. At my own institution I am part of a team of senior Indigenous academics seeking to implement curriculum to service a university wide Indigenous graduate attribute which means that all graduates are expected to have Indigenous professional capability (Page, S., Trudgett, M., & Bodkin-Andrews 2016). We are seeking to avoid the 'bolted on' curriculum (Rigney 2011). The degree to which all institutions are successful has considerable implications for Indigenous communities and is why now, more than ever, the scholarship of both teaching and learning is critical. Unless we understand how students 'grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning' it will be difficult to teach well (Brookfield, 1998, 199). While teaching and curriculum development is crucial here, researching what is both redress for institutional failure to meet the aspirations of Indigenous peoples and social experiment, is vital.

The transformative project outlined by Universities Australia and being attempted by universities, is deeply aspirational but less than well defined. Beyond a "coherent sector-wide initiative that binds all universities together with common goals" (Universities Australia, 10) there is, as yet, little guidance as to how this outcome will be achieved. However, the magnitude of the project is evident. Reform which includes all students is challenging for institutions, and raises some particularly interesting possibilities for SoTL. What is suggested in the *Indigenous Strategy* is that through their teaching and research

(and research into teaching) programs universities will contribute to the “social, cultural and economic development of, with and by Australia’s diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities” (16). This responds, hopefully, to Indigenous peoples questioning of the value of sharing Indigenous knowledge without transforming both our institutions and our societies (Sefa Dei 2008). Four types of transformation are required; curriculum, student, institution, and nation. All four coalesce to create the transformative learning envisaged by Mezirow (2003), in which adults hone critical self-reflection skills, and sharper judgement through education, potentially realising a fairer world. At the very least the institutional, and classroom dialogues sparked by the *Indigenous Strategy* should contribute to discursive environments considered critical to transformation (Mezirow, 1997).

It is against this background that I now return to the question posed earlier about the challenges to student learning in Indigenous Studies and the teaching and learning research project that has grown from a generalised wondering to a systematic inquiry, much as Boyer (1990) envisaged. From an array of potential research methods which might have been brought to bear on such a question, I chose one that was novel and emerging. In the context of this paper it is worth noting that I was first introduced to threshold concepts at the 2010 ISSOTL conference where I was struck by the idea of there being discipline specific concepts, in particular tacit ideas, which we as teachers might not explicitly teach, which were nevertheless critical to student learning. A seminar given by Erik Meyer at my home institution in 2012, further captured my imagination and laid the foundation for what would become my doctoral project, perhaps underlining the value of broad dissemination of teaching research.

The implicit constructivist theoretical underpinnings of the threshold concepts framework reflects my conception of learning as knowledge being created by individuals and not simply transferred from teacher to learner, rather the learner creates understandings in their own minds through interaction with the teacher and instruction (Hendry, Frommer, Walker, 1999). The threshold concepts framework was first introduced in the early 2000’s (Meyer & Land, 2003) and as such is a relatively recent development in the broad field of higher education learning and teaching scholarship. Threshold concepts are ideas that foster students’ ability to think like a discipline expert and are deemed to be critical to learning,

developing and mastery in a particular discipline (Cousin 2006). A threshold concept has a number of defining characteristics, including that it must be transformative, bounded, integrative, irreversible and deal with troublesome knowledge (Meyer & Land 2003). These characteristics distinguish threshold concepts from more concrete foundational knowledge in a discipline, for example learning a formula in mathematics or knowing a set of dates in history.

Two ideas which seem to have resonance when I talk to colleagues about threshold concepts are the notions of troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2008), particularly those ideas which are counter-intuitive, and the liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2006) a metaphorical space in which students often vacillate before grasping key ideas. In this liminal space students will potentially grasp the new knowledge, integrating it into their thinking and understanding of the discipline. Failing to understand the concepts may potentially lead learners to resort to mimicry (Cousin, 2006) without genuine understanding. My observations over many years as a teacher of Indigenous Studies, is that many students struggle to move beyond simplified binary thinking and indeed resort to mimicry through writing what the teacher is perceived to desire. I was interested to investigate this phenomenon through research that involved the students' individual expressions of experiences of learning in Indigenous Studies rather than analysis of the artefacts of learning (student assignments).

Here I will foreshadow a more full dissemination of the research findings – which address the question beginning the paper - by sharing two things which have struck me; the breadth of the student struggle or liminality and the depth of the subsequent transformations. From the small cohort of students (ten) I interviewed for this qualitative project I have considered how superficially we come to 'know' our students through our classroom interactions and their responses to assigned tasks. Interviews allow a glimpse into a student's world, beyond the discipline context, to which busy teachers are rarely privy. For many in this group of students, the struggle extended well beyond safe classrooms created by their teachers, to encompass interactions with their friends, and families and everyday situations. Most came to see Indigenous peoples and themselves in profoundly different ways to their initial understandings; often with implications for the broader disciplinary contexts of their major

areas of study. What initially began as a novel approach to researching challenges in learning which were student, teacher, and discipline focused, ultimately yielded rich insights into the results of teaching.

To conclude this piece I want to look to the field of research, as Boyer did in his original conceptions of the Scholarship of Teaching. Indigenous research is shifting from a pan-Indigenous focus to an increasingly differentiated, community or tribe focus (Bodkin-Andrews, Bodkin, Bodkin, & Whittaker, 2016). There is also some emphasis on tribal education (Brayboy, 2013). A SoTL which is distinctly southern carves out a niche from which our scholarship might be combined to achieve a more distinctive and identifiable canon. While SoTL of the South is not exclusively Indigenous and Indigenous Studies is not limited to the south, collectivity of this kind affords a prominence which it is often difficult to find individually. My experience of a recent Australian higher education conference is that Indigenous scholarship and scholarship about Indigenous issues is largely hidden. This is not to say that Indigenous scholars of teaching and learning are not publishing and sharing findings in conferences - a key feature of SoTL - rather that we are sometimes marginalized in scholarly communities. This does not have to be the case. At the Australian Association of Research in Education in 2016 there was a highly visible and enthusiastically attended series of Indigenous scholars and topics. Empirical research and the sharing of findings in communities of practice is needed if we are to further the transformative agenda put forward by Universities Australia and contribute to progressive pedagogies which address inequity across the south.

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