

Thorpe, K.R. (2022). Relational Narratives for Developing Knowledge at the Cultural Interface of Indigenous and Western Knowledges. In: Peters, M.A. (eds) Encyclopedia of Teacher Education. Springer, Singapore.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1179-6\\_473-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1179-6_473-1)

# Relational Narratives for Developing Knowledge at the Cultural Interface of Indigenous and Western Knowledges

Katrina R. Thorpe

Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, The University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

## Introduction

Teachers in settler colonial nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States are being called to action to embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the curriculum. This call to action is in response to sustained efforts by Indigenous peoples and their allies to make universities accountable to historical truth telling, reconciliation, and decolonizing education agendas. Increasingly, universities are responding to this call through the development of Indigenous graduate attributes and processes seeking to “Indigenize” education. Mohawk Canadian educator Marlene Brant Castellano (2014) states that Indigenizing education requires that,

every subject at every level is examined to consider how and to what extent current content and pedagogy reflect the presence of Indigenous/Aboriginal peoples and the valid contribution of Indigenous knowledge. Such an examination would shift the focus from remediating deficits in Aboriginal students to addressing bias and omissions in the educational system. (para 1)

Indigenous educators have warned, though, that it is not adequate to just add more Indigenous content “as if it were another data set for Western knowledge to discipline and test” (Nakata 2007, p. 8) as this can lead to decontextualized, surface approaches to embedding Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and pedagogies in the curriculum. In the Australian teacher education context, Indigenizing processes are expanding as a consequence of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* which requires that all preservice teachers demonstrate strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Standard 1.4) and develop understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Standard 2.4) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011). Classrooms where Indigenous knowledges and perspectives interact with Western knowledge frameworks are not innocent spaces – they are contested spaces where preconceptions, racism, and stereotyping about Indigenous people impact on engagement, dialogue, and an openness to learning. Consequently, while teacher educators have an abiding responsibility to embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the curriculum, it is important to be alert to how Indigenous peoples and knowledges are being represented and understood in this complex knowledge space.

This piece contextualizes the significance of Indigenizing teacher education, foregrounding the Cultural Interface (Nakata 2007) as a theoretical framework to understand what happens in classrooms when Indigenous and Western knowledges intersect. Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), a relational methodology, is then explored as a pedagogical process to assist pre-service teachers to “think narratively” about their life experiences of learning at the intersection of Indigenous and Western knowledge frameworks. Narrative methods such as storytelling, journaling, and poetry are discussed as storying methods that foster creative and critical thinking as a relational pedagogical process at the Cultural Interface.

## The Significance of Indigenizing Education

Preservice teachers bring to their studies a range of differing attitudes and knowledges about

Indigenous peoples, as well as preconceptions about the value and significance of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives as a mandatory requirement of university and school curricula. Some of these attitudes (whether they be positive, negative, or indifferent) and understandings were formed through personal interactions with Indigenous peoples at school, in their home and community settings, or through mainstream/social media. However, most preservice teachers have had little personal contact or friendship relationships with Indigenous peoples. Indeed, a lifetime experiencing non-Indigenous representations about Indigenous peoples is a legacy of colonization which has manifested in deficit discourses about Indigenous peoples and cultures. In schools and education discourse, these essentialized understandings construct Indigenous students as *lacking* – intractably *behind* other students – a “*problem*” in need of *fixing*. Furthermore, these deficit narratives are mobilized through the use of seemingly entrenched “us” and “them” binary logics (superiority/inferiority; white/black) that continue to have a deleterious influence on Indigenous education policy and practice. The persistence of these dominant deficit narratives necessitates contestation by teacher educators along with the inclusion of Indigenous content and representations from multiple angles, with breadth and depth repeatedly throughout their teacher preparation.

## The Cultural Interface

In the Australian context, Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata has made significant contributions to Indigenous education for theorizing the negotiations and tensions that occur in teaching, learning, and research when Indigenous and Western knowledges intersect. Known as the Cultural Interface, Nakata (2007) states that the Cultural Interface is,

constituted by points of intersecting trajectories. It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses. (Nakata 2007, p. 199)

The Cultural Interface was theorized in the context of developing Indigenous Standpoint Theory, which Nakata (2007) describes as enabling “to see my position in a particular relation with others, to maintain myself with knowledge of how I am being positioned, and to defend a position if I have to” (p. 12). The Cultural Interface offers three principles for critical inquiry and reflection. The first involves the consideration of the *locale* (principle 1) of each learner engaged at the Cultural Interface. Put simply, this is a consideration of where one is positioned in the learning journey of coming to understand Indigenous standpoints. Encouraging learners to reflect on how their life experiences impact on what they currently know, and how they came to know, provides deeper awareness of one’s standpoint. Learners consider their personal history and how they are positioned in light of subjective struggles that occur in the “everyday” for Indigenous people (Nakata 2007).

The Cultural Interface is a significant theoretical and analytical tool because of its potential to create new insights and understandings regarding the *tensions* (principle 2) and challenges that occur for learners when Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges intersect. In this contested space, *tensions* occur when binary “us and them” logics of Western traditions discursively position Indigenous peoples and knowledges as deficit and “other.” The Cultural Interface becomes a site for difficult and uncomfortable dialogue as knowledge representations about Indigenous peoples are challenged and untangled. Cultural Interface theory also conceives of the *agency* (principle 3) of learners to understand, contest, and reframe colonial hegemonic knowledge production. The agency experienced by preservice teachers is linked to their *locale* – how they understand themselves to be positioned at the Cultural Interface and how the teacher and other students position them in this space. As a theoretical tool, the principle of *agency* can illuminate the possibilities for understanding and dismantling Western representations of Indigenous peoples through engaging with difficult dialogue and through reflexivity (Nakata 2007).

Drawing on Nakata's work, Aboriginal academic Tyson Yunkaporta's teaching and research sought to mitigate against "taking sides" in the Western/Indigenous knowledge contest (us/them; superior/inferior), and instead "harmonise the relationship between the two pedagogical systems" (2009, p. 50). As Yunkaporta notes, the Cultural Interface is a reconciling framework to theorize "the dynamic overlap between systems previously defined as dichotomous and incompatible" (2009, p. xv). While the Cultural Interface was originally theorized to better understand how Indigenous people maintain an Indigenous stand-point, navigate, and bring agency to these spaces in their "everyday", it has also been used to examine non-Indigenous teachers and students' experiences within Indigenous higher education and school curricular.

As the Cultural Interface offers a framework to begin to unpack and situate students' life experiences when engaging with Indigenous standpoints; the use of narrative methods such as storytelling, journaling, and poetry provide a way for students to insert themselves into the larger historical, social, political narratives shaping their lives. Narrative Inquiry is a relational methodology and pedagogical process that can assist teacher educators and preservice teachers to "get started" with the process of interrogating and reflecting on the Cultural Interface to inform Indigenizing curriculum processes and culturally responsive pedagogies.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

As an Aboriginal teacher educator who began teaching mandatory Indigenous Studies in teacher education over two decades ago, experiences of preservice teacher racism, stereotyping, and apathy toward engaging with Indigenous perspectives have been commonplace. These experiences led me on a professional journey to develop knowledge of theory to better understand the social, cultural, political, and educational forces that come together in the Indigenous Studies classrooms. I was also seeking theory to inform my practice when navigating the contested and colonizing spaces I encountered as an Aboriginal academic. Across time, a range of theoretical perspectives including postcolonial theory, Whiteness theory, critical theory, and critical Indigenous theories and research methodologies have shaped my evolving teaching philosophy and practices. Pedagogies that build relationships and connections between peoples and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing are an important part of my teaching philosophy. Narrative Inquiry, a research methodology which shares a commitment to relationality is informative in developing pedagogies that facilitate critical and reflective thinking in Indigenous education. Relationality is a way of living in the world that recognizes the relationship and interconnection between people, place, and the nonhuman world. Aboriginal academic Karen Martin describes the significance of relational ontologies in Aboriginal societies:

All things are recognised and respected for their place in the overall system. Whilst they are differentiated, these relations are not oppositional, nor binaric, but are inclusive and accepting of diversity. These relations serve to define and unite, not to oppose or alienate. (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003, p. 207)

Narrative Inquiry provides a relational methodology for teacher educators to work alongside Indigenous and non-Indigenous preservice teachers to guide reflection and critical inquiry processes. Relational pedagogies foreground each preservice teacher's "whole life story" acknowledging and valuing the personal, social, and cultural milieu influencing their professional development. Indeed, relational and culturally responsive pedagogies work from a philosophical position that it is important to seek insights into students' lives and experiences that exist outside of the classroom. Culturally responsive teachers also recognize the significance of being aware of how their own life experiences impact on their pedagogies and find ways to build connections between themselves and the social and cultural contexts of their students.

Narrative Inquiry is a process of working with people's stories of experience. People make sense

of their lives and build connections with others by telling and retelling stories. In the process of telling and retelling stories, we create meaning in our lives and build connections with those we share stories. Stories can be retold from past experience and can also be “living stories” (Clandinin and Caine 2013, p. 171) created through a “relational living alongside” each other during an inquiry process (Clandinin and Caine 2013, p. 170). Narrative Inquiry is also marked by a commitment to thinking *with* stories instead of thinking *about* stories. Moore argues that thinking about stories portrays narrative as an object (2002, p. 200). Thinking *with* stories enables a process by which narratives bring to consciousness knowledge of self and, through sharing stories, build connections and create new ways of relating to one another.

### The Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

Narrative inquirers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) developed a relational methodology for studying experience which requires attending to three dimensions; *sociality*, *temporality*, and *place*. This metaphorical three-dimensional space pays attention to personal experiences in connection with others (sociality); a person’s experiences over time (temporality); and an awareness of how experience is situated in the places where events and experiences occur. Working with preservice teachers using the three-dimensional Narrative Inquiry space as pedagogical “touch-stones” while sharing stories enables preservice teachers to make connections, push for deeper self-understanding, and develop a consciousness of each of these interconnected inquiry spaces as they relate to Indigenous education.

### Thinking Narratively at the Cultural Interface

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that the practice of Narrative Inquiry requires a process of “thinking narratively.” Here, the three-dimensional spaces of *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* must be attended to in order to understand experience. This final section coalesces the notion of “thinking narratively” with the theoretical framework of the Cultural Interface to illuminate what happens within classroom contexts when Indigenous and Western knowledges intersect. Through a process of thinking narratively by telling and retelling stories, *together* preservice teachers and teacher educators can bring to consciousness the complex interactions that occur at the Cultural Interface and start to imagine possible actions for their work in Indigenous education. In a research context, the notion of “thinking narratively” is an inquiry process that leads to the creation of “research texts” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000); in a classroom context, teacher educators can work with preservice teachers to share stories using a range of methods such as oral and written stories, journals, and poems which can be shared as part of their learning journey.

### Thinking Narratively About the Locale of the Learner

The Cultural Interface presupposes that preservice teachers come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and when they enter the classroom, it is through the doors of a Western education system that has normalized Western ways of knowing and created a corpus of knowledge *about* Indigenous people (Nakata 2007). Thinking narratively about one’s personal experiences with Indigenous peoples and cultures (sociality); Aboriginal education experiences over a lifetime (temporality); and the events and locations (places) that one has lived and worked alongside Indigenous peoples, enables students to reflect on how these experiences have developed their personal understanding, and expanded or limited possibilities for personal and professional engagement with Indigenous knowledges and standpoints in their “everyday.” This inquiry process facilitates the uncovering of how and in what ways their current locale influences classroom pedagogy.

### Thinking Narratively About the Tensions at the Cultural Interface

Tensions occur at the Cultural Interface as learners bring objectified and deficit frames of reference about Indigenous people into the class-room. Addressing racist stereotypes about Indigenous peoples can be a source of difficult and uncomfortable dialogue for many teacher educators and preservice teachers. Uncomfortable class-room dialogue is one of a range of reasons teacher educators

may avoid including Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum or will adhere to “safe” topics if it is feared they do not have enough knowledge themselves to help their students disentangle stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples. Tensions also play out in the social (e.g., friendships and family) and political milieu within which preservice teachers live and work. Thinking narratively about the tensions experienced at the Cultural Interface brings to light the events, times, and places these tensions and struggles played out and with whom. By critically reflecting on and examining these tensions, teacher educators and preservice teachers can consider their responses and use these insights as learning opportunities to think through more constructive ways of addressing these tensions in the future. The key here is that teacher educators and preservice teachers *do* engage with uncomfortable dialogue to create new understandings that influence future pedagogy. Thinking through and reflecting on these tensions will not be a linear process – Narrative Inquiry recognizes that a back-and-forth process is required to challenge and disentangle dominant deficit narratives.

### Thinking Narratively About the Agency of the Learner at the Cultural Interface

Thinking narratively about the agency of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student learning at the Cultural Interface assists preservice teachers to understand that across time, in different social settings and places, students will experience agency along a continuum between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge positions. The agency experienced by Indigenous students will shift depending on the epistemologies, histories, languages, etc. of those with whom Indigenous students interact at the Cultural Interface.

Thinking narratively provides opportunities to illuminate critical events that preservice teachers experienced as agentic in moving toward more nuanced understandings of Indigenous and Western knowledge positions and can bring to the fore the life experiences that created the possibility of such agency to emerge. Developing deeper understandings of the ways preservice teachers experience agency at the Cultural Interface will help foster insight to the pedagogical contexts that help mobilize respectful and critical engagement when Indigenizing the curriculum.

## **Narrative Methods for Sharing Lived and Told Stories**

Narrative Inquiry research does not seek a resolution and report definitive “findings” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), so likewise Narrative Inquiry as a relational pedagogical process means that preservice teachers work with narrative methods to illuminate salient experiences, learning, interpretations, and possible actions as part of the inquiry. Narrative methods such as storytelling (oral and written), poems, videos, and journaling can foster creative and critical thinking, academic creativity, and imagination. By way of example, “found poetry” can be created from written stories or journals through a process of eliminating redundant words to encapsulate the “heart of the matter” of a life experience. Found poetry is particularly useful when preservice teachers may not want to share all aspects of their story but nevertheless, can capture key shifts in relation to the situations, places, and events that challenged their thinking at the Cultural Interface. Teacher educators who share a commitment to relational pedagogies will also ensure that they too share their stories. Through sharing their stories of experience, teacher educators play an important role in modeling relational pedagogies.

## **Conclusion**

As universities continue to move toward Indigenizing education, it is important that both teacher educators and preservice teachers develop a deeper understanding of what happens when Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are brought into Western knowledge frameworks. It is important for preservice teachers to reflect on who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming as they engage relationally with the voices and knowledges of Indigenous peoples. From a pedagogical perspective, hearing stories from an Indigenous standpoint opens up avenues to consider how one might (inadvertently) reinforce “us/ them” binaries, deficit discourses, and simplistic

decontextualized representations of Indigenous knowledges and peoples. Relational narratives help teacher educators and preservice teachers disentangle the fracturing logics embedded in Western education systems and model new ways of enacting relationship-building pedagogies.

## Cross-References

- [Disruption and Understanding in Professional Teaching Contexts](#)
- [Indigenous Education, Critical Perspectives to Enhance Learning Practices](#)
- [Indigenous Knowledges, Early Childhood Sociocultural Contexts](#)

## References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2011). *Australian professional standards for teachers*. Carlton South: Education Services Australia.
- Castellano, M. B. (2014). Indigenizing education. *Education Canada Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/indigenizing-education/>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V. (2013). Narrative inquiry. In A. Trainor & E. Graue (Eds.), *Reviewing qualitative research in the social sciences* (pp. 166–179). New York: Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Martin, K., & Mirraboopa, B. (2003). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for indigenous and indigenist re-search. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76), 203–214.
- Morris, D. B. (2002). Narrative, ethics, and pain: Thinking with stories. In R. Charon & M. Montello (Eds.), *Stories matter: The role of narrative in medical ethics* (pp. 200–223). United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.
- Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(Supplementary), 7–14.
- Yunkaporta, T. (2009). *Aboriginal pedagogies at the cultural interface*. (Professional Doctorate, James Cook University). Retrieved from <https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/10974/>