



Learning from Country to conceptualise what an Aboriginal curriculum narrative might look like in education

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Abstract

Missing from the Australian Curriculum is a coherent Aboriginal curriculum narrative that is legitimate in its own right, rather than an “add on” to other curriculum areas. We argue that in order to do this, teachers need to experience Country-centred learning led by local Aboriginal community members. From these experiences, teachers can build relationships and better understand local knowledges and practices to develop an Aboriginal curriculum narrative for their teaching. In an urban Australian university teacher education program, Learning from Country in the City (LFC), a largely non-Aboriginal cohort of preservice teachers participate in Aboriginal community-led learning outside the classroom and on Country. This paper is based on qualitative data from individual yarns and group yarning circles with ten Aboriginal community-based educators and 30 preservice teachers. From this data, a Learning from Country Framework (Burgess et al., *Teachers and Teaching*, forthcoming) was developed which emphasises (i) Country-Centred Relationships, (ii) Relating, (iii) Critical Engagement, and (iv) Mobilising. Through deep listening and truth telling processes, preservice teachers build confidence and relationships with Aboriginal people and Country, awaken their critical consciousness and explore processes to conceptualise an Aboriginal curriculum narrative for their teaching. Through deep listening to the cultural, historical, and socio-political narratives of place, learning occurs through being and doing. Aboriginal community-based educators highlight the significance of Country-centred knowledges and truth-telling processes to challenge settler-colonial narratives and the power dynamics that have silenced Aboriginal people.

Keywords Aboriginal curriculum · Country-centred learning · Narrative

Introduction

Teachers continue to struggle to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal¹ knowledges, perspectives, and pedagogies and so more often than not, avoid this area unless it is a compulsory component of the syllabus they are teaching (Burgess et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2020). Given that Aboriginal curriculum content was reduced or deemed optional in the new Australian Curriculum (Salter & Maxwell, 2016), teaching in this area often depends on individual teacher confidence, commitment,

and capacity. Issues that contribute to poor-quality teaching in this area include fear of doing the wrong thing and/or offending Aboriginal people, limited teacher knowledge, understanding and skills to implement Aboriginal content, and feeling overwhelmed and/or burdened by an already overcrowded curriculum (Bishop & Durksin, 2020; Lowe & Galstraun, 2020; Maxwell, 2014). For many, Aboriginal content is not on their radar at all, especially if this content is optional or not clearly linked to syllabus outcomes. Moreover, Aboriginal content is not often included in assessment tasks and so not perceived by teachers or students as important knowledge. This is compounded by

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¹ The term Aboriginal will be used and respectfully includes Torres Strait Islander peoples in line with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy (2008). While this paper is constructed on Aboriginal land—Gadigal land—it is also the preferred term of this Aboriginal community. When names of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander scholars or international Indigenous scholars are included in the main text, the Country or cultural affiliation has been included where this information is available. Indigenous is used when referring to Indigenous peoples internationally or where the author has purposefully used the term Indigenous in their work.

many non-Aboriginal teachers' lack of cultural literacy where they have little awareness or understanding of their own culture or conceptualisation of its broader role in education and society (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016; Gillan, et al., 2017).

Moreover, stereotypes, misconceptions, and silences about Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and histories (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014) continue to permeate curriculum, schooling structures, and practices. Indeed, the repetitive and simplistic teaching of Aboriginal content across the primary and secondary years of education continues to perpetuate the marginalisation of Aboriginal knowledges (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Clark's (2008) research on the history curriculum found that students were mostly "uninspired" by their experiences of learning Aboriginal history which was "taught to death, but not *in depth*" leading to student disinterest and resistance to Aboriginal history (p. 67, emphasis in original). Moreover, Maxwell (2014, p. 28,) states that Aboriginal content "has been excluded for longer than it has been included" within schools and while considerable developments in legislation and policy over the past five decades have sought to address discrimination and promote Aboriginal curriculum, pedagogies and achievement benchmarks, assimilatory schooling practices (Buxton, 2017) and the legacy of racism continues to marginalise Aboriginal knowledges (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014). Paradoxically, current government education policies place an emphasis on the expectation of *all* teachers in *all* schools to provide quality education while embedding both purposeful and relevant Aboriginal perspectives aimed at *all* students. Consequently, the key message communicated to teachers in schools is that Aboriginal education is "everybody's business" (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 13).

For the purposes of this paper, we view the concept of narrative as an accumulation of stories, lived experiences, events, and meanings. This narrative approach shifts the emphasis from a rigid framework of what a "story" should comprise and what the order needs to be, such as having a structured beginning, middle, and end. A narrative approach allows for the unfolding of the story; an unfolding that may take place over time, may move "backwards" and "forwards", at times revisiting points of the narrative and expanding up these. Narratives, then, can provide clarity and depth to contextual issues, daily practices, and human and non-human interactions (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007). Sikes and Gale (2006) suggest that,

...narrative is what we do. We use it to make sense of the world as we perceive and experience it and use it to tell other people what we have discovered and about how the world, or more specifically aspects of it, are for us (p. 4).

Aboriginal scholars, Phillips and Bunda (2018), suggest that for Aboriginal peoples, "Stories are embodied acts of intertextualised, transgenerational Law and life spoken

across and through time and place" (p. 8) and their value can be seen in presenting "ways in which Aboriginal people can recolonise country and how Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing in the contemporary everyday can be voiced and heard" (p. 8). Narrative is therefore representational in articulating a particular understanding or view of the world as well as relational through cyclical and reflective storytelling that reveals ideas, values, events, emotions, and actions through contextual experiences (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007).

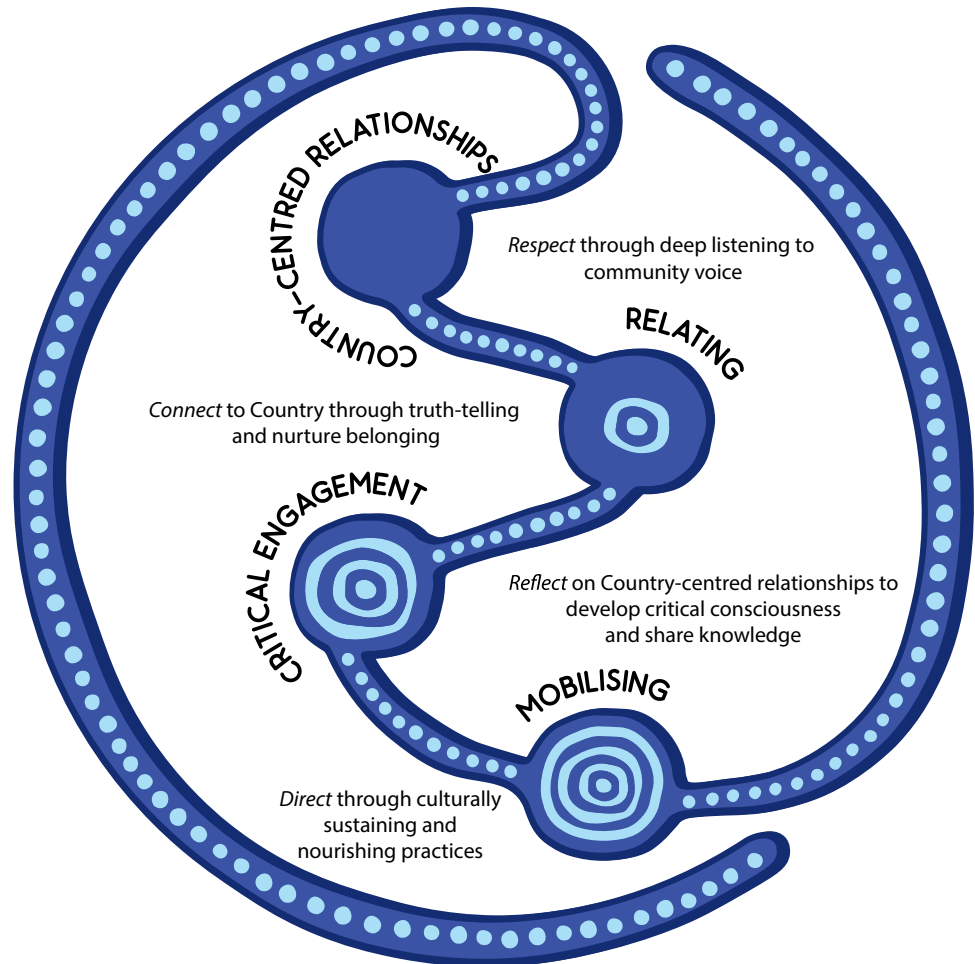
In conceptualising the notion of a curriculum narrative, we suggest that this is a combination and construction of the stories that teachers know (and have probably experienced) about a particular subject or content area that provides knowledge, understandings, and therefore guidance about how and what to teach. However, given the issues raised earlier about barriers for teachers in implementing Aboriginal knowledges, perspectives, and pedagogies, the idea of an Aboriginal curriculum narrative is often unfamiliar, limited, and/or fractured. Consequently, teachers and schools tend to default to popular, and at times, tokenistic imaginings such as "dot paintings", Reconciliation Week, or a historic event such as the Freedom Rides. Therefore, we suggest that teachers and schools can build an Aboriginal curriculum narrative by applying local place-based knowledges and pedagogies developed with and by listening to Aboriginal community-based educators² (Authors, forthcoming).

In this paper, we reveal the ways in which preservice teachers who participate in Learning from Country activities engage with Aboriginal Country and community and discuss how this can demonstrate an emerging conscientisation and articulate the impact of these experiences when considering their future role as teacher. By applying our Learning from Country Framework (see Fig. 1), we analyse the potential of building relationships with Country to support preservice teachers to recognise the role of relationality in understanding Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. We suggest that building relational and situated knowledge at the local level is critical in developing a deep understanding of local Aboriginal knowledges as a basis for developing insight to issues that impact locally and globally and therefore better prepare students for the "real world" (Perkins & Shay, 2022).

This approach provides insight into how to move from the tokenistic and peripheral implementation of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum, such as is arguably evident in the Australian Curriculum's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross-Curriculum Priority* (CCP). Moving away

² The term "Aboriginal community-based educators" was discussed at length with the local Aboriginal people providing the LFC experiences and they agreed that it is the most appropriate "collective" description of who they are and what they do.

Fig. 1 Learning from Country Framework



from tokenistic implementation is vital in order to develop a coherent and engaging Aboriginal curriculum narrative that has its own legitimacy alongside western disciplines. As Smith et al. (2011) argue,

neo/colonial dominance – history textbooks, curriculum policies, popular films and so on – continues to work here ... to create myths about the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal creation stories we tell (or don't tell) each other ... [these] work to represent the beliefs ... citizens hold regarding the narrative genesis of our nation state. (p.54)

The consequence of not challenging neo-colonial or colonial dominance has far-reaching impacts in education. In arguing the case for *the legitimacy of Aboriginal curriculum narratives* alongside western disciplines, we challenge such dominance *and* set out to position Aboriginal narratives in the curriculum in their own right. In so doing, we are not setting up a binary opposition between western and Aboriginal curriculum narratives, rather we seeking to open out possibilities or these knowledges to coexist. Nor are we asserting “singular” narratives, a key point that is emphasised

by McMahon et al. (2017) in their work on valuing biepistemic practice. As they explain, “we are not asserting here a distinct binary of ‘homogenous Western’ or ‘homogenous Indigenous’ epistemologies; rather our starting point is these are heterogenous (heterogenous Western and heterogenous Indigenous)” (McMahon et al., 2017, p. 44).

Researcher positionality

Our team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lecturers/researchers position Aboriginal voices and Country as central to our teaching and research projects. We are guided by the Aboriginal community-based educators who run the Learning from Country experiences and lead us in yarning circles to discuss ways in which we can develop preservice teacher conscientisation to challenge settler-colonial deficit discourses and grand narratives. We acknowledge that Aboriginal sovereignty has never been ceded and, as we work on Country, we believe that this “place” should be the focus of our efforts to reshape power relations. Cathie Burgess is a non-Aboriginal educator working in Aboriginal education for over 35 years and parent of Aboriginal children involved in local Aboriginal

community sports and cultural activities. Katrina Thorpe is an Aboriginal postdoctoral research fellow who has taught Aboriginal Studies in teacher education for over two decades. Suzanne Egan is a non-Aboriginal researcher who comes from a background working in community-based organisations, who values the ongoing learning from interactions with Aboriginal community-based educators and Country and is building this into current learning and teaching work with social work and social sciences students. Valerie Harwood is a non-Aboriginal Woman born on Kaurna Country (Adelaide) who has been a university educator of sociology of education for two decades at undergraduate and postgraduate level. She collaborates with Aboriginal colleagues and in Aboriginal led research projects where she lives and works.

The Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2011) was introduced by the federal government with the intent to standardize, direct, and control what is taught in local schools across the country, replacing the previous system of state-based syllabus development and implementation. The Australian Curriculum includes cross-curriculum priorities (CCPs) such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Sustainability, and Australia's Engagement with Asia. The primary aim of the CCPs is to include essential knowledge for teachers to embed into their curriculum/syllabus areas where relevant. In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander CCP, the content covers Aboriginal cultures and histories through the key organizing concepts of place, land and Country³ which "highlights Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' special connection to Country/Place and celebrates the unique belief systems that connect people physically and spiritually to Country/Place" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d., para 11). However, through the structure of the organising concepts, this CCP still presents Aboriginal knowledges in a compartmentalised, rather than holistic, way, and so "legitimate" disciplines such as English, science, technology etc. often include perspectives in an ad hoc way, reliant foremost on individual teacher interpretation and discretion. Consequently, Aboriginal epistemic legitimacy is limited by how it is framed by these disciplines (Lowe & Galstaun 2020) and so students only learn and experience Aboriginal knowledges in relation (and often compared) to western knowledge, not as a legitimate knowledge or discipline in its own right.

The CCPs attracted criticism for their precarious standing as being simultaneously embedded across all learning areas and optional electives for implementation by teachers (Salter & Maxwell, 2016), as chief curriculum writers Donnelly and McGraw themselves say, as "options, not orders" and "only where educationally relevant, in the mandatory content of the curriculum" (McGraw, 2014, p. 247).

Salter and Maxwell (2016) further note that curriculum goals are linked to economic goals (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008), and so, the underlying intent of CCP is to "fix the problem" of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander underachievement when compared to non-Aboriginal students (p. 298). This deficit positioning of Aboriginal peoples and associated discourses of disadvantage underpin government policies and strategies (Buxton, 2017), and as such deny Aboriginal people agency in determining education directions such as curriculum to address these discourses (Fforde, et al., 2013). Therefore, the persistent curriculum narrative is defined by a deficit positioning of Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and histories through the lens of underachievement.

Of serious concern, therefore, is the absence of a coherent and well-supported Aboriginal curriculum narrative that teachers are familiar with and confident in implementing. This concern is compounded by the current way in which western education systems construct curriculum to protect their socio-cultural and political advantage, a clear example being the outcome of Recommendation 17 in the 2014 Review of the Australian Curriculum:

ACARA revise the Australian Curriculum to place more emphasis on morals, values and spirituality as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration, and to better recognise the contribution of Western civilisation, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the role of economic development and industry and the democratic underpinning of the British system of government to Australia's development (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 246).

More recently the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the announcement by the federal Minister for Education that "A revised national [Australian] curriculum will elevate the study of Western and Christian heritage in history". The article goes on to state that this will provide students with "the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the importance of our Western and Christian heritage in the development of Australia as a prosperous and peaceful democracy" (Baker, 2022). This emphasis on Western and Christian heritage in this revision lays bare the ongoing privileging of these values and is a cause of deep concern to Aboriginal peoples and their supporters.

Given these clear, unambiguous statements by curriculum authorities, there is little doubt that in Australia, the purpose

³ Country is an Aboriginal English (as different from Standard Australian English) term that describes land as a living entity, the essence of Aboriginality and includes relational connection to people, culture, spirituality, history, environment, and ecologies of the non-human world.

of curriculum is to reinforce western dominance, leaving little room for diverse perspectives, worldviews, and interpretations of reality. This is in distinct contrast to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019, p. 4), the current guiding document for curriculum and schooling in this country, which has as its key underlying principle, the contribution of education to promoting “a socially cohesive society that values, respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity”.

It is any wonder that in the light of these dissonant policy statements and curriculum directives that teachers struggle to develop an authentic curriculum narrative that reflects the diverse student and family groups they engage with daily, and undermines their agency in engaging with Aboriginal knowledges, histories, and communities. These curriculum directives reinforce the notion of curriculum that learning is *about* the “real world” beyond the classroom, is organised and structured by a higher authority, is objective and compartmentalised, and necessary for success after school. This is the antitheses of Aboriginal knowledge systems which are holistic, relational, and interconnected, where knowing occurs through doing and being, where experience counts and learning occurs through the social practices of life (Harrison et al., in press). This therefore prompts us to consider how can teachers address this dissonance, and more importantly engage with Aboriginal knowledges and practices so that the most disadvantaged students in our system, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, can achieve success as First Nations sovereign custodians of the Country without compromising the social, cultural, and economic benefits gleaned from education taken for granted by all students.

Moving toward curriculum as relational rather than representational

Curriculum, as an organisational structure, directs how students learn, where they learn, what counts as “knowledge” and how success is measured and therefore determined (Harrison et al., in press). Most learning is theoretically based, often abstract, transmitted via authoritative texts and is *about* the “real world” rather than reality. Osberg and Biesta (2003) assert that western curriculum is governed by a representational epistemology:

In modern, Western societies schooling is almost invariably organised as an epistemological practice. Educational institutions present knowledge about the world ‘outside’ and for that very reason they rely upon a representational epistemology. This is an epistemology which says that our knowledge ‘stands for’ or represents a world that is separate from our knowledge itself (p. 84).

Knowledge as reality is represented as an objective entity where students learn *about* life and this determines how students learn in schools and how teachers teach (Osberg & Biesta, 2003). This *representational epistemology* leads Osberg and Biesta (2003) to consider “knowledge” and the “world” as part of an evolving complex system, rather than as separate systems as they are represented in current western knowledge systems. This therefore indicates the inherent power of curriculum to determine and organise knowledge, the way it is taught and who it benefits. Moreover, Bernstein (1971) suggests that “[h]ow a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control” (p. 85). The Review of the Australian Curriculum also acknowledges the inherent power of the curriculum to reify a particular reality: “No curriculum is ever value free and curriculum designers, whether they are aware of it or not, are building on or privileging a particular belief or philosophy about the nature and purpose of education” (p. 12). Therefore, the question of power is critical in understanding the nature of curriculum, who/what it represents, and who is advantaged through its acquisition.

Green (2018) however, identifies an important distinction between “knowledge of the powerful” and “powerful knowledge”, noting the difference between knowledge associated with powerful interest groups and “‘powerful knowledge’ that has its own objectivity, materially and socially, and a formally authorised truth status” (p. 241). He further suggests that the question of power opens up possibilities for change if we consider approaching teaching and learning through doing, where knowing and doing occur at the same time and thus knowledge is experienced as an epistemology of relationality. This suggests that the notion of representational knowledge in fact misrepresents knowledge if we come to know a particular reality through curriculum is transactional, relational, and interactional (Harrison et al., in press).

In contrast to western knowledge (re)production and systems, Aboriginal knowledges are holistic, relational, and interconnected, embodied in and enacted through Country (Harrison et al., 2016). Apalech Clan member Yunkaporta and Gandugari Elder of the Murrawarri Nation, Shillingsworth, through their relationally responsive Indigenous standpoint suggest that axiology (values, respect, and protocols) must precede epistemology (knowledge, knowing, and reflecting) as the starting point for learning and it is only once these ethical processes have been authentically engaged with, that one can move onto ontological processes of relating, being and connecting (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p.2). Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) contend that relational processes where Aboriginal worldviews denote that everything exists in relation to something else stand at the heart of being, providing the context for adapting operational processes or methodologies that extend intellectual processes.

This idea that knowing can only occur through doing is drawn upon by several researchers and theorists. Thayer-Bacon (1997), drawing on Dewey's notion of knowing through doing, articulated the concept of a relational epistemology as a way to acknowledge and include contributions to knowledge of all people as well as problematise broader knowledge "truths" (p. 240). Here, knowledge is described in relation to the knowers and, in order to understand the transactional connections between being and truth, epistemology is considered in relation to ontology (p. 241). Grounded in the notion that all people are contextual beings, Thayer-Bacon (1997) contends that, "*we develop a sense of 'self' through our relationships with others, and we need a sense of self in order to become potential knowers (author emphasis)*" (p. 241). If we extend this notion to Aboriginal knowers and knowledge, relationships to Country become the key to developing and enacting a relational epistemology, and experience curriculum through being and doing.

Keddie (2014) applies this idea of an epistemology of relationality to the Aboriginal Australian context by positioning community, kinship, and family networks and relationships at the centre of knowledge and knowing. To approach the meaning of Country from an Aboriginal perspective requires of us to listen carefully to how Country is talked about by Aboriginal people. We pause here to listen to and reflect on Auntie Laklak Burarrwanga, a Datiwuy Elder, Caretaker for Gumatj explanation of Country,

Country has many layers of meaning. It incorporates people, animals, plants, water and land. But Country is more than just people and things, it is also what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to laws, custom, movement, song, knowledges, relationships, histories, presents, futures and spirit beings. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel and take action. Country for us is alive with story, law, power and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So you see knowledge about Country is important because it's about how and where you fit within the world and how you connect to others and to place. (Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013, p. 54)

Here, Auntie Laklak Burarrwanga highlights that Aboriginal people are in deep dialectical relationships with Country which form the basis of knowledge as an epistemology of relationality where knowledge and knowing occurs at the same time (Harrison et al., in press). Knowledge emerges and is shared from personal and collective experiences, and so this learning is appealing to teachers and students alike.

A number of researchers (Harrison 2017; Harrison et al., 2016; McKnight, 2016; Thorpe et al., 2021) highlight the

significance of Country as curriculum in storying the land, its cultures, histories, and local ecologies that are shared with younger generations through daily lived experiences rather than in artificial locations such as classrooms (Harrison et al., 2019; p.246). Furthermore, Harrison et al. (2019) suggests Country as teacher, is in itself.

an enactment of place-based relations between animals, plants and humans, and students will learn if they have the skills to listen and recognise these agentic relationships ... Country is the enactment of curriculum when we decentre the role of the human individual in learning. (p.246)

Goenpul scholar and Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998) locates relationality as reciprocal learning based on shared experiences, obligations, collaboration, and solidarity that "encompass[es] principles of generosity, empathy and care [and as] cannot[ing] ideals of respect, consideration, understanding, politeness and nurturing" (p. 279). Noonuccal scholar Karen Martin and Booran Mirrabooa (2003) also notes the significance of Indigenous ontology as inclusive and accepting of diversity rather than binary or oppositional (p. 207). Connected to this is the critical role of voice and agency embedded within a cultural context, articulating a social-constructed view of reality and therefore offering diverse knowledges built on unique lived experiences. Assumptions by dominant groups can at times (and arguably more frequently) mistakenly position Aboriginal voices as "other"; often resulting in the misrepresentation and omission of Aboriginal knowledge. A significant consequence of such mistaken assumptions is the omission of representational knowledge becoming respectfully embedded in curriculum.

A relational epistemology recognises the significance of socially constructed knowledge and is therefore critical in promoting caring relationships where it is safe to speak and develop voice. This repositioning of the curriculum centres learners and their relationships with Country through story-focused, place-responsive pedagogies that engender a deepening knowledge, understanding, care, and love for the places they inhabit and provides a structure and knowledge base for an Aboriginal curriculum narrative in its own right.

Context

"Learning from Country in the City" is a teaching/learning approach and concurrent research project embedded in three Aboriginal education electives available to students enrolled in teacher education at an urban university in Sydney, Australia. In this study, Learning from Country (LFC) means learning from Aboriginal peoples, cultures, histories, sites, and all that Country entails including the interdependent

ecologies of the land, waterways, and seas. The urban context is significant as most non-Aboriginal people do not perceive urban places as Aboriginal places, as Porter (2018) notes, “this urban country is also urban *Country*” (p. 239, emphasis in original). This notion confronts stereotypes that position “real” Aboriginal people as living in the “outback” or “bush”, and therefore one must travel to remote Australia to experience an “authentic” Aboriginal culture.

These three elective subjects aim to better prepare the largely non-Aboriginal cohort of preservice teachers to apply culturally and relationally responsive curriculum and pedagogies when teaching Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students as they become teachers. Local Aboriginal community-based educators are employed to take preservice teachers into the community and onto Country to walk with and listen to local narratives of place. Preservice teachers experience at least five different LFC activities that highlight the richness, diversity, and relational connections of Country. These experiences occur alongside classroom-based theoretical learning, which is purposeful and structured in ways to develop deep listening, critical reflection, and cultural humility. Preservice teachers are encouraged to critically reflect on their learning experiences in terms of what LFC means for developing and implementing coherently sequenced and structured Aboriginal content in their curriculum. Thus, a critical step involves building relationships with Aboriginal community-based educators to develop skills to engage with local Aboriginal families and communities when they become teachers. By actively listening to Aboriginal peoples’ lived experiences and relational connections to Country, preservice teachers begin to move beyond stereotypical and surface-level approaches by understanding the significance of Aboriginal place-based knowledges and perspectives. This developing conscientisation is critical for understanding the nature of curriculum, who/what it represents, who is silenced, and who is advantaged by Western knowledge production.

Methodology

This qualitative study sits within a critical Indigenous methodological framework where knowledge “truths” are analysed and disrupted to reflect the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of Indigenous knowledges in western hegemonic curricula. As Aboriginal scholar Rigney (1999) notes, “What must be emphasized here is that, from an Indigenous perspective, my people’s interests, experiences, and knowledges must be at the centre of research methodologies and the construction of knowledge about us.” (p. 119). This is in response to an ongoing history of problematic, often harmful research conducted “on” Aboriginal peoples rather than “with”. Aboriginal educator and researcher Shay (2016,

p. 287) argues that this occurs through researchers often controlling the research problems and focus of the research, often dismissing significant socio-cultural knowledges important to Aboriginal communities. To counteract this, this project foregrounds Aboriginal knowledges by positioning Aboriginal voices and Country as central to the conceptual as well as methodological processes of the research. Collaboration with the Aboriginal community-based educators who lead the Learning from Country experiences for the preservice teachers occurred to discuss the critical stance this project takes in subverting western hegemonic research processes by positioning Aboriginal protocols of respect, reciprocity, and relationality at the forefront.

The research question focussed on for this paper, “How does LFC guide and support teachers in developing an Aboriginal curriculum narrative to inform their teaching and learning draws on eight individual interviews and five focus groups with 30 preservice teachers and ten individual interviews and two focus groups with ten Aboriginal community-based educators”.⁴ We employed yarning is an Indigenous method (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Shay, 2019) succinctly described as an informal, non-linear, and relational way of conversing and deep listening. As Barlo et al. (2020) note,

Yarning is a powerful methodology from the vantage point of a relationship journey because the process engages the researcher in a web of relationships which includes research participants, the knowledges and stories themselves, Ancestors and Country, and histories and futures as they live in the telling and hearing of stories. (p. 46)

Yarning therefore provides a way in which to move beyond the problem of representation to engage with the relational aspects of knowledge [re]production. We did this with preservice teachers to model culturally appropriate communication protocols in Aboriginal contexts and with Aboriginal community-based educators to respect and engage with personal stories. Yarning is premised on Aboriginal ways of constructing and sharing knowledge and reflects protocols that include building relationships through the social and collaborative exchanges that respect voice. This approach supports flexibility in articulating personal and sometimes, difficult experiences and so is appropriate for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in this context. These yarns explored the understandings, experiences, and perceptions of the “Learning from Country” concept, and their views on the benefits and challenges of the Learning from Country approach in developing an Aboriginal curriculum narrative that they could apply in their teaching practice.

We use a case study approach to bring depth and clarity to “real-life” data drawn from the interconnected LFC experiences of preservice teachers and Aboriginal

⁴ Individual and focus group participant are given pseudonyms.

community-based educators. (Harrison et al., 2017a). This relational, dialogic approach provides opportunities to explore the inter-relationships between preservice teachers, Aboriginal community-based educators, Country, and knowledge creation, illuminating the dynamics of change through the co-existence of multiple realities and meanings (Harrison et al., 2017b).

Initial qualitative data analysis involved developing matrixes to identify emerging themes through annotating transcripts and coding in NVivo 11 to aggregate individual and collective responses. These were visually displayed and presented to Aboriginal community-based educators in a two-day workshop for annotation, feedback, discussion, and analysis. From this, a conceptual framing of the study was developed to reveal relational links, disconnections, and nuances and “produce thick descriptions of social texts characterised by the context of their production, the intention of their producers and the meanings mobilised in the processes of their construction” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 294). The social texts produced through the individual yarns and group yarning circles reflect the study context and provide an ongoing, reflective account of the participants’ experiences and interrelationships that emerged through the processes of LFC.

There are three key methodological issues to consider with this research. The first two arise from the structure of the university courses in which the LFC experiences are embedded. Firstly, as elective courses, the cohorts are small, comprising preservice teachers genuinely interested in becoming effective Aboriginal education teachers and as such, the research findings are likely to be biased towards positive responses. Secondly, the relatively short length of the courses (maximum 36 h) on which the research is based curtails the range and availability of LFC experiences, including the time needed to critically reflect on learning within this timeframe. Finally, until we analyse the impact of the LFC framework in classrooms when preservice teachers begin teaching (phase 3 of the project), we cannot know if this approach contributes to effective teacher practice in Aboriginal contexts. We envisage future research contributing to this knowledge gap.

Findings and analysis

A conceptual framing of the study emerged through consideration of Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth’s (2020) “Relationally Responsive Standpoint” using metaphors for process which reflect ways in which the Aboriginal community-based educators presented Learning from Country experiences to the preservice teachers. In response, the preservice teachers, at various stages in their learning, considered and worked through these processes as they came to understand Learning from Country and its relevance to them as future teachers. These processes are described as follows:

The first step, Respect is aligned with values and protocols of introduction, setting rules and boundaries. This is the work of your spirit, your gut.

The second step, Connect, is about establishing strong relationships and routines of exchange that are equal for all involved. Your way of being is your way of relating because all things only exist in relationship to other things. This is the work of your heart.

The third step, Reflect, is about thinking as part of the group and collectively establishing a shared body of knowledge to inform what you will do. This is the work of the head.

The final step, Direct, is about acting on that shared knowledge in ways that are negotiated by all. This is the work of the hands. (p. 11–12)

The Learning from Country Framework can be represented visually as follows:

The metaphor applied here is that of bodies of water, a significant feature of the Country in which this project occurs. The dark blue acknowledges that Country is strong—it is “full” of knowledge. The light blue circles represent the “activity” emanating and rippling throughout the Learning from Country processes which include deep listening to Aboriginal community voices and truth telling. There is a rippling of knowledge and relational connections that flow from one waterhole to the next. As each waterhole ripples with new knowledge and impacts on existing knowledge, it flows into the next waterhole. The connecting waterways between the waterholes represent the ebb and flow of knowledges and understandings that ripple through each waterhole and contribute to an emerging curriculum narrative. The circular image reflects the non-linear, reflexive nature of Aboriginal communication where past, present, and future coalesce. Significantly, this non-linearity acknowledges that there is no beginning or end, that Learning from Country is a lifelong learning experience. To commit to this experience requires critical reflexivity, reflection, and acknowledgement of the strength of these waterways as they carve a path for relationship-focussed listening and learning from Country, community, and voice.

Country-centred relationships

Understanding, valuing, and participating in Aboriginal communication protocols such as sharing personal yarns is key to embarking on the Learning from Country journey. These protocols ensure a core responsibility to connectedness, community accountability, and reciprocity to respect local Aboriginal knowledge and cultural processes. As Yunkaporta (2019) (cited in Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p. 3) notes; “Your culture is not what your hands touch – it is

what moves your hands. Your hands must not be guided by someone else's rationality, but by your own relationality". In mobilising this relationality, Aboriginal community-based educators acknowledge a core responsibility in sharing their knowledge to talk back to coloniser narratives. As Aboriginal community-based educator Craig notes, *"It's using our own narrative and our own space in terms of how we engage with institutions like universities or education departments ... again it's putting our community back into owning what they want to teach"*. Uncle Ken leverages his narratives to challenge the power dynamics that have silenced Aboriginal people for too long *"We are the ones that carry the power of truth. That's why we've been marginalized because capitalism doesn't want to know this power of truth"*. Lisa makes the important point that *"It's just softly using our interpersonal and communication skills to engage in different ways to reflect on their own cultural language ... let them know that it's okay"*. It is critical that preservice teachers listen to the messages emerging from the narratives in order to gain a deeper understanding of the settler-colonial context within which they live in and benefit from, and that permeates the lives of Aboriginal peoples.

Preservice teachers demonstrated cultural humility and respect when listening to these narratives, noting the impact of community voice and agency in challenging settler-colonial grand narratives, *"they speak about their own history, to present it in the way that they want to instead of us reading a book and having our own thoughts ... I think that's pretty special"* (Amy). This shows a move from static representations of knowledge in books to one that involves deep listening, truth telling which nurtures the relational and affective human aspects of knowledge which are embedded in [Country-centred relationships](#). Furthermore, while preservice teachers articulated a willingness to learn from Country and engage with these narratives, they lacked confidence and know-how as Danielle (preservice teacher) states; *"when you don't have that practical knowledge that can stop a lot of people from actually going ahead and making those sort of connections ... it can be quite nerve-racking"*. As confidence developed, a growing understanding of the relevance of Country-based local narratives emerged, *"that all came back to the Country and community even though it's seen [in mainstream society] as historical, it's living now, and it's still being shaped ... because it's our country as well and we should be interacting with it as much as we can"* (Tom), and so preservice teachers began to envision ways in which they could build an Aboriginal curriculum narrative into their teaching.

Relating

For Aboriginal people, *relational* processes underpin "being" as an ontology that embodies Indigenous epistemologies, welcomes diversity and plurality, and encompasses the

affective and personal. All the Aboriginal community-based educators generously shared their lived experiences with preservice teachers to demonstrate the role of relationality in understanding and connecting the human and non-human worlds. Uncle Ken makes this point, *"What it is, is not only opening people's eyes to another reality that's all around them but to show them that there is a culture here that connects people to this land, you know... and it's in the city"*. Preservice teachers also note the significance of connecting with Aboriginal narratives, including the idea of collective experiences being bigger than the individual, *"they have their whole history with them and when they talk to us, they don't talk about themselves, they talk about their entire community and the history from millions of years where everything has a foundation in something bigger"* (Bilal).

Truth-telling became critical for both Aboriginal community-based educators and the preservice teachers listening to lived experiences of trauma and tragedy peppered with humour and optimism. Aboriginal community-based educators are well aware of the impact of these *"because this is a thing of trauma that we're talking about that goes back a long time, and its only at the very early stages of beginning to heal"* (Uncle Ned). Aboriginal community-based educator, Karen also recognises the importance of emotion to the listener, *"I see that my role is to get that emotion coming out in a sense ... which gives them that opportunity to explore that emotion, to ask questions that need to be asked"*. She also notes that *"while some might be uncomfortable, others will embrace it with their own spiritual beliefs, otherwise it becomes that sense of guilt and shame"*. Here, knowing occurs through being for Aboriginal people, and the affective experiences embedded in learning from Country (Harrison et al., 2017b) are important for building the relationships, connectedness and belonging needed to develop an authentic, resonant and culturally sustaining curriculum narrative. Preservice teacher, Danielle explains the impact of this,

Getting to meet them (Stolen Generation survivors), really hits home as to how much government policies, have impacted the communities ... I watched a documentary on it, I read a book on it, seen newspaper reports about it, and so I felt like I knew it, but I didn't. You don't know it until someone's standing there talking to you about how it has impacted their life and you can see that emotion. Having that face-to-face connection with someone, and even though they're talking to an entire room, everyone in that room felt that personal connection and one hour was worth, probably 10,000 hours for me.

Danielle demonstrates a deep level of affective and personal engagement with the survivor story that moves beyond an epistemological categorising or claimed "knowing". In the former, learning is occurring in a deeply felt way, in the

moment. Danielle is experiencing unsettling encounters with difficult and traumatic knowledges which have been shared with her in a “face-to-face connection” (Danielle). This suggests Danielle’s experiencing of these narratives moved beyond representations of an Aboriginal person or historical event; this was not a mechanistic portrayal reproducing stereotypes or offering up representations of Aboriginal people. Rather, Danielle’s position as detached spectator was destabilised and she was unable to remain “unmoved” by the experience. Danielle describes how she experiences the power of emotion that moves her beyond cognitive engagement, builds a relationship with Country and the broader group creating a sense of belonging to the speaker as well as the rest of her peer group. There is a further significant point to make here, the role and activities of the teacher (here a university academic) in Danielle’s experience of Learning from Country. In Ellsworth (2005) discussion of representation, the importance of the role of the teacher is underscored in the closing comments of her book. Here, she poignantly states,

Audacious learning selves in the making will risk relationality with the social body that surrounds them, but only if their emergence is met by a particular look on the teacher’s face: the look of a teacher in the midst of the experience of her own learning self in the making. (p. 175)

The creation of “audacious learning selves” in a classroom or educational context, we can say occurs in connections that involve relationality, which is inclusive of Country. And as we can see from Ellsworth’s above statement, this is connected with the teacher, and their expression of their learning self with their students. Ellsworth’s statement drives home the significance of the teacher, for the teacher is part of relating in the building Aboriginal curriculum narratives. Here, we can see how the teacher’s communication of their own learning self contributes to the learning of those with whom they are teaching.

While Aboriginal community-based educators talk about the healing power of sharing their stories, preservice teachers experience an intimate connection with the storytellers engendering a sense of inclusivity in a space they didn’t expect to find it. This impacts significantly on their conscientisation and openness to critically engage with new ways of knowing, being and doing.

Critical engagement

Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) identify *reflect* in their framework as an intellectual process for identifying cultural metaphors so that Aboriginal people can “express, structure and inspire thinking and learning processes” (p. 7) in relational rather than linear ways. Similarly, in the Learning from Country framework, *reflect* indicates a growing

critical engagement with the new knowledges that foregrounds a developing conscientisation, or awakening to new ways of knowing, being and doing. The metaphor of rippling water distorting and reshaping reflections visualises this coming to know. As Aboriginal community-based educator Lisa notes, *‘I take them through a bit of history, let them know some of our past policies, bring in some of those personal experiences because often they’ve never met an Aboriginal person’*. By presenting lived experiences in socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts, preservice teachers developed more nuanced understandings of learning from Country in the city, and prompting more respectful and reciprocal knowledge sharing. As Aboriginal community educator Lisa suggests, *“the only way we’re actually going to get you to try and understand and teach it is to walk alongside Aboriginal people”*.

As preservice teachers’ come to understand how the curriculum reproduces western hegemonic knowledge as “truth”, they develop a “critical consciousness of the local historical, political and social context” (Bishop & Durksen, 2020, p.9). In the Learning from Country project, preservice teachers noted that learning from Aboriginal people, and the stories of lived experiences provided. Aboriginal people and Country were key to developing their critical consciousness and capacity for self-reflection. Nathan sums this up nicely when he says, *“I thought what’s really interesting is the idea that different people have different knowledges and practices ... reinforcing diversity ... highlighting the complexity of each situation so it’s not what you see at face value”*. Nathan’s acknowledgement here of the contextual diversity and complexity of knowledges and practices indicates an emerging conscientisation that challenges static and one-dimensional representations of Aboriginal peoples. Learning from Country experiences harness the value and power of personal stories and realistic situations in ways that foster critical thinking, in what Kohli et al. (2019) suggest is a “a dynamic and reflexive approach to reading the world (text, media, audio, interactions) that strengthens one’s understanding of power, inequity, and injustice” (p. 25).

Mobilising

The final process, *direct*, is operational, focussed on doing as a way of knowing. Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) note that this is “about positioning, sharing and adapting practical metaphors in response to the other three elements” (p. 9), that must be consistently in dialogue community and Country. In the Learning from Country framework, we identify this as culturally sustaining practices drawn from Alim et al.’s (2020) work. The focus of this work with communities of colour in the USA is firstly, centring community voice to foster and sustain Indigenous identities, cultures, languages, and histories, and

secondly, developing teacher conscientisation to decentre Whiteness and hegemonic western educational practices. We argue that in the Australian context, this positions sovereignty at the heart of Country-centred relationships and truth-telling as essential to developing critical engagement with these relationships. In this sense, Aboriginal community-based educators see their role as critical in urging preservice teachers to become changemakers in schools, as Lisa notes, *I feel that the only way we're going to move forward is through education, and by people learning and understanding that we must develop empathy ... through Aboriginal people sharing their story*. She recognizes the importance of storying to developing empathy to create a sense of belonging for teachers, students and community to engage in culturally nourishing schooling practices (Lowe et al, 2020).

Preservice teachers consistently noted that the “doing” of this learning through “stories”, provided a deeper understanding of connectedness and belonging through the lens of Aboriginal communities and Country and the affective responses that emerged from these experiences. Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) talk about how the hands and feet, the “walk your talk” (p. 9) causing us to reflect on how to mobilise Country-centred relationships in the classroom. Amy makes a direct connection between learning from Country experiences and her future role as teacher,

Like the talk we had at Redfern acknowledging the fact that a lot of Aboriginal Australians had poor experiences with education. So, there are very good reasons why they might not be comfortable and might not want to connect with us. Again, it was like, Duh, but, so helpful to think about this because that can really affect how to approach my teaching.

Here, Amy reflects on the difficult experience that some Aboriginal community-based educators had with western schooling and a reflection of the failure of the school and education system. Through listening to the Kinchela Boys Home⁵ Uncles’ personal stories, the preservice teachers came to understand their responsibility as teachers and the significance of this to making a difference in their classrooms.

In conclusion: building an Aboriginal curriculum narrative

The purpose of this paper is not only to analyse and critique curriculum to reveal limitations, but to propose a way forward for teachers in the classroom to address these limitations.

⁵ Pseudonyms are used for the names of individuals. The name of the organisation is included here in recognition of the ongoing work of this Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation.

In considering the research question—how does LFC guide and support teachers in developing an Aboriginal curriculum narrative to inform their teaching and learning—we found that utilising a relationally responsive standpoint and paying attention to the building of new narratives, connections are revealed by Country and diverse Aboriginal voices. This can occur through deep listening and critical engagement with new ways of being, doing, and knowing. In working with preservice teachers and being guided by Aboriginal community-based educators, we identified ways to localise a place-based curriculum, signposting a commitment to challenging settler-colonial claims and western hegemonic schooling.

The Learning from Country framework provides guidance for processes to follow, such as initiating respectful conversations with Aboriginal school students, their families, and local communities. In following such processes, teachers are supported in their listening and valuing of Aboriginal connections to Country and community. By applying the LFC framework, teachers connect to the relationships they are building with local people and become ready for the truth-telling narratives emerging from Country. Through this relational understanding of Country and local Aboriginal peoples’ histories, cultures, and communities that sit within this, a sense of belonging emerges as teachers, students, and communities share knowledges and experiences that connect them to Country. Mobilising culturally nourishing and sustaining practices in and out of the classroom provides a way forward for engaging students in their learning by including their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds into curriculum and pedagogy. Critically, this is not a linear process but a relational and reflective one as the circles represent the need to continually reflect, move and grow. As Aboriginal community-based educator Uncle Ken says, “now it’s time in my career to pass on the teachings to the teachers... There isn’t that much time, so you don’t dilly dally around with words, you know”.

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