**TEACHING AND LEARNING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

*Michael Hromek*

*School of Architecture, University of Technology Sydney*

***Abstract***

*While the notion of education is quite broad, a teacher must consider the idea of Indigenous education. From this paper's perspective, then, two aspects are in need of further consideration. First is the idea of non-Indigenous people teaching Indigenous people; and second is the idea that Indigenous people know completely different things from a non-indigenous perspective, and hence can ‘teach’ the non-indigenous quite different ideas and knowledge that may not have been thought about or even valued in our mainstream classrooms.*

*So while some may consider Indigenous people in the classroom as simply just students, at the same time is the significant idea that Indigenous people have completely different kinds of notions in terms of what they are thinking. Hence this paper is not only about teaching Indigenous people, but also the notion of* learning from Indigenous people*. As such this paper questions how might the non-Indigenous best learn from the Indigenous? How can we promote a better understanding of Indigenous ideas, values and culture in the classroom in a culturally appropriate manner? This paper suggests that working closer with Indigenous teachers and knowledge-keepers at all levels of education may offer a significant enhancement in terms of our student understanding of Australian Indigenous culture.*

**Introduction**

With the notion of education being quite broad, a teacher must consider a variety of concepts, ideas and viewpoints to present to students within the classroom. This broad focus must include the idea of Indigenous knowledge. To begin, this paper will address the idea of teaching indigenous knowledge - focusing on the idea of non-indigenous people teaching indigenous students.

Yet at the same time Indigenous people have (a) contrasting ideas to a non-indigenous perspective with a markedly different notion of education and thus might not simply accept the ‘white’ educational process and (b) know completely different *things* that may not have been thought about or even valued in our mainstream institutions. Hence the second section of this paper considers how education might be ‘diversified’ rather than similar. How educators might not simply teach, but learn from Indigenous peoples in relations to notions of their culture, society and identities. And hence it considers how the Indigenous can potentially ‘teach’ the non-indigenous ideas / viewpoints / knowledge that constitute completely contrasting kinds of notions in terms of what they are thinking.

As this paper is not only about teaching Indigenous people, but also the notion of learning from Indigenous people, this paper questions how might the non-Indigenous best learn from the Indigenous? How can we promote a better understanding of Indigenous ideas, values and culture in the classroom - and other learning locations - in a culturally appropriate manner?

The last section of this paper suggests that working closer with Indigenous teachers and knowledge-keepers at all levels of education - and at a variety of learning locations, such as our institutions but also non-traditional learning locations, such as ‘on country’ or certain urban indigenous areas - may offer a significant enhancement in terms of our student understanding of Australia's diverse Indigenous culture.

**Indigenous knowledge within the classroom**

As a basic starting point let us consider the question of what is Indigenous knowledge? While definitions vary from source to source, the most useful for this paper defines Indigenous knowledge as “the distinct ideas, information, and skills held by Indigenous peoples, usually contrasted with Western scientific knowledge” (Castree, Kitchin, Rogers. 2013).

An important point to note within this definitions is the use of the word ‘contrasting’, as from this paper's perspective, this word gets to the heart of the matter surrounding some of the issues of teaching this knowledge to others. From a basic principle, this knowledge is vastly different from that which is taught in mainstream Western curricula - with its heavy focus on reading, writing, mathematics, science and so on. While it's worth noting that Indigenous knowledge may not initially apply to all disciplines (for example maths, Western science and so on), yet it does have immediate relevance to others (the humanities, health, design, landscape etc).

Including Indigenous knowledge within the classroom continues to meet many challenges. From a curricular perspective, teaching Indigenous knowledge is often put into the ‘too hard basket’ and considered too complex to be taught in the right way to do it justice. Goulet & Goulet (2014, Pg 5) note that

“..one of the issues in Indigenous education is that educational theories are most often based on white, middle-class, Euro-centred views of teaching and learning. Many of these theories are useful, but they are limited and problematic when it comes to addressing Indigenous matters.”

As a result, “Indigenous peoples continue to be under-represented at all levels of education. Changes to curricula continue to meet resistance, and schools continue to fail to ensure success for many Indigenous students.” Goulet & Goulet (2014, Pg. 3).

In addition, academics dealing with Indigenous knowledge report that Indigenous student dropout rates is relatively high and is often attributed to Indigenous students not being able to “..attend high school in one's community, learning about Aboriginal history and/or about Aboriginal peoples, and having an Aboriginal teacher or teachers aid” (Lamb, 2014. Pg 156). As well as facing issues such as “..racism and having work questioned by colleagues remains a challenge for students at predominantly White institutions.” (McKinley, Brayboy, Solyom & Castagno 2015)

As a consequence our students - and many other Australians - have a rudimentary knowledge of Australian Indigenous cultures outside of the main big topics taught, being that of the race wars, the stolen generation and basic knowledge of Indigenous cultural understandings, such as ‘the dreaming’, the ‘walk about’ and dot paintings.

At its worst, and mostly from a historical perspective, Indigenous knowledge outside of the above is not considered to be a relevant subject to be taught to students within the classroom. As a result, and from this paper's perspective, this knowledge is underrepresented, misunderstood or completely missing within our curricula at all levels of education.

**Non-indigenous teaching the Indigenous**

With the idea of the non-indigenous teaching Indigenous students, three issues are in need of immediate consideration. First (a) is the existing focus on best practice guidelines in regards to teaching Indigenous students, with much academic literature focusing to “empower teachers to help halt the cycle of disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and make a real difference to their relationships, learning outcomes and opportunities in the short and long term” (Perso, 2015). Goulet expends on theses disadvantages by describing “the social conditions challenging Indigenous peoples.. include “poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, physical and mental health problems, suicide and incarceration” (Goulet 2014, Pg. 4). While the above statistics are disheartening and a stark reminder that there is still much work to be done to address these disadvantages, this above focus has created a gap in our educational system that addresses a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous peoples, who they are, what they are thinking about and the kinds of knowledge they have.

On the other hand, and to expand on the above, (b) Indigenous people are highly intelligent beings with their own ideas, ways of being and belief systems who might not just simply *accept* the ‘white’ educational process. Many academics have discussed the issues surrounding curricular and teacher training programs “..housed at mainstream, predominantly White universities can be colonial and thus require significant focused work in order to ensure...whether these programs continue the legacy of colonization and assimilation.” (Castagno 2012) As such we as teachers and curricular creators, must consider how education might be ‘diversified’ rather than similar.

Lastly (c) Indigenous people are not all the same, they are a vast kind of people from various tribes, each with their own language, lore and knowledge that is potentially similar but also quite different. Thus what does this mean for educators?  How do we begin to teach such a vast array of knowledge? Which knowledge do we choose to teach? This continues to be a challenge for educators.

While there is still much to be done in terms of a broader understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures and the knowledge they hold, at the same time there is a ground swell of movement within Australia to address this lack of information within our educational institutions. Much of these efforts come down to individual people, or ‘champions’, which are mostly from within our institutions and the community (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who are pushing this cause. While these individual effort are producing good results on a small scale, very recently the Australian government have started to get on board, with recently announced wide sweeping changes to the HSC to address some these gaps in knowledge about Indigenous people, by “placing a greater focus on Australia and Aboriginal leaders in history, and significantly changing maths and English courses (McNally, 2016).”

While much more support is needed from the top level of government, this is a positive step forward to addressing some of gaps in knowledge and also - further down the line - perhaps the value placed upon Indigenous knowledge within our educational system. Yet there is still more to be done within all levels of our educational hierarchy - from bottom to top, from kindergarten to doctoral thesis students.

As a brief conclusion to this section, this paper is not against the idea of non-Indigenous teaching Indigenous knowledge, but rather the non-Indigenous teacher must make special considerations in regards to “..a culturally sensitive curriculum and learning environment” (Lamb 2014, Pg 156) when presenting this subject matter. They must go further in their efforts to present, understand and explain this knowledge and to enhance their students understanding of Indigenous culture. Subsequently this may require a mind-shift on the teacher's behalf. On this, Goulet argues that:

“As teachers, we have a responsibility to ensure that Indigenous students are successful in school while developing as Indigenous peoples. Students should not have to leave their Indigenous identities behind to be successful in school. It is incumbent upon teachers to find and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and understandings (epistemologies) and to use Indigenous practices and methods to support learning and fully develop student’s potential.” (Goulet 2014, Pg 5)

**Learning from Indigenous people**

While some may consider Indigenous people in the classroom as simply just students, at the same time is the significant idea that Indigenous people have completely *different kinds of notions in terms of what they are thinking*. As mentioned above, Indigenous people have their own ideas and ‘ways of being’ that are often in stark contrast to the values of mainstream white culture. Hence this paper is not only about teaching Indigenous people, but also the notion of *learning from* Indigenous people. This very notion constitutes the differences between what both parties know. This section will discuss specific theories, ideas and conceptual frameworks to connect Indigenous knowledge to effective classroom teaching practices. As such this section questions how might the non-Indigenous best learn from the Indigenous? How can we promote a better understanding of Indigenous ideas, values and culture in the classroom in a culturally appropriate manner?

As the title of the paper suggests, from a teacher's perspective, Indigenous knowledge should be *taught* but also simultaneously *learnt*.  It must be a dual notion, in that we as teachers must simultaneously teach Indigenous knowledge but also *learn it from Indigenous knowledge holders*.

**Teaching Indigenous knowledge requires a mind shift**

Firstly, it is important to stress the critically important role of the teacher. As Goulet (2014, Pg. 79) notes “Observing a great teacher at work is like watching a beautifully choreographed dancer or athlete perform. It looks easy until you try it yourself.” In reality, some indigenous knowledge holders are not teachers, in the same way that many white people are not teachers yet for some they can effectively communicate, re-interpret and make sense of complex ideas. For those who cannot, there is an onus on teachers to analyse, reinterpret and pass on information. Sowhile the principles of effectively teaching Indigenous knowledge to students may apply to all everyone (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), yet “Indigenous education has unique features based on the history, culture, and philosophies of First Nations...who tend to view the world in a more holistic way than the European framework that is the basis of our education system” (Goulet & Goulet 2014. Pg. 78)

As such, teaching and learning Indigenous knowledge may require a mind shift. As teachers we must force ourselves to be reflective, to learn from each other, but most importantly learn how to listen and be receptive to Indigenous ideas *that might be outside the mainstream curriculum*. As academics and teachers, it’s important that we continually examine our own belief structures and assumptions, and that we do so with a rigor and a determination that goes beyond mere self-reinforcement. We must consider the very notion of how Indigenous people might well have *specific* and *importantly different* issues, such that *others should learn* from Indigenous persons in relation to the notions of ‘their’ culture, society, ideas and views. (Harfield & Hromek 2015)

**Teachers must create space**

Teachers must also create a space for Indigenous people to talk, and a space for them to tell stories. From an Indigenous perspective, stories teach us how to be Indigenous & I suggest the opposite is also true, in that it will teach others what it's like to be Indigenous. Perso (2015) talks about developing sensitivity to a student's cultural background by creating a tone - or in other words space for this to occur - in the classroom that is conducive to learning. In addition, we must build

“strong teacher-student relationships and effectively managing student behaviour….to bridge the demands of the curriculum with the learning Indigenous students bring with them to the classroom and how to work with the learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.”

Goulet (2015. Pg. 78) echoes these notions by explaining that “...as teachers, in our classroom actions and interactions, can open ourselves and make positive connections with and for our students, we create a place where we all, students and teachers, learn about ourselves. We learn how to be in the world, how to interact with others and through reflection, come to have the knowledge of who we are as a person and as a people”

**Working closer with Indigenous knowledge holders.**

As a starting point this section begins with the notion that, indigenous people are - in different forms - highly intelligent beings and at a principle level, have different kinds of notions of education. From this, there is an idea that, an Indigenous person can inform the non-indigenous about various ideas / knowledge because a vast majority of people simply *don't know about them*.

Considering Indigenous people were in Australia for thousands of years before white people came, there is this notion that says we need to understand the ideas and knowledge these people have developed over this vast amount of time, and to understand the differences contained within their idea of education. There are very bright indigenous people - professionals, academics, community leaders etc - who want to talk to white people about these ideas. But we need to make efforts to engage with these knowledge holders in an active way, to create a space where our students will hear directly from these people. This paper suggests that working closer with Indigenous teachers and knowledge-keepers at all levels of education will offer a significant enhancement in terms of our student understanding of Australia’s diverse Indigenous culture.  Yet where will this learning take place?

**Alternative learning locations**

While teaching and learning Indigenous knowledge should primarily take place with our educational institutions, this paper suggests that learning can and also should take place in other - potentially non-traditional - knowledge centres that reside outside of the institutes. The following section will discuss these alternative learning locations that are conducive to teaching and learning Indigenous knowledge.

So while this knowledge should be taught first and foremost in our established educational institutions, such as schools, universities, TAFE and so on, yet this paper suggests that Indigenous knowledge resides outside of the classroom, and as such education should not just be taught there, but also in other potential knowledge centres both urban and remote places. In this sense, some Indigenous knowledge may have nothing to do with schools or universities, but is still strongly about the idea of *indigenous people teaching ideas in other places*. Places like ‘on Country’ (or in other words, within nature), yet for many Indigenous people this knowledge resides within city areas as well, such as significant urban Indigenous locations such as Redfern in Sydney, or Fitzroy in Melbourne.

As stipulated earlier, Australia’s Indigenous culture is diverse, with varying ideas and ways of living that, while might share similarities, also have vast differences between them. As such indigenous people in Redfern will know and want to talk about completely different things compared to those in remote areas. In this way Indigenous knowledge is highly localised to particular areas and places, and this is an important point to consider from a teaching perspective when presenting *Indigenous knowledge to students*.

While not everyone will want to go along and listen to indigenous people teaching ideas, at the same time, there are some that will. Some students will want to know about this. For example many tourists that visit Australia also want to know about this. Within our own faculty of Architecture at the University of Technology, Sydney - there is a large proportion of international teachers, with a vast majority of those having an active interest in Indigenous knowledge’s. As such some will want to know and understand what they have to say, and thus if we have two potential places for this knowledge to be passed on, there is a greater chance of being able to pass on this information to those who seek it.

**Conclusion**

As a brief conclusion, the following should be considered when thinking about the notion of teaching and learning Indigenous knowledge. As with all curricular, there is a great responsibility on teachers in delivering Indigenous knowledge. They should:

* Create strong connections to local Indigenous communities and engage with knowledge holders
* Make space for these conversations and to create direct with Indigenous people
* This space of learning can and should occur outside of the classroom, in other knowledge centres, for example on ‘Country’, or within significant urban Indigenous locations.
* Indigenous knowledge is not all the same; it is highly localised, tied to different tribes, cultures and peoples from a variety of areas. This must be acknowledged.
* Perhaps most importantly, teaching must consider the dual notion of teaching and *learning from Indigenous people*. This requires the teacher to be reflective, to have a mind-shift, to move away from their preconceived viewpoints, positions and belief systems.

The potential of a teacher is that they are able to reinterpret, make sense of, and analyse complex ideas. Yet Indigenous knowledge, as different as they might be, do require a potential mind shift away from more traditional Euro-centred modes of learning. While much scholarship and academic literature addresses the above in much more detail, often this is from other Indigenous cultures, such as Maori theory or Indigenous American and Canadian theory. In many ways, Australia has a lot of catching up to do in relation to specific understanding of Australia's Indigenous peoples. As such the aim of the paper is to begin these conversations, and provide a platform to build upon.

Lastly this paper will stress one more point, which is potentially the main purpose of this paper, but also perhaps why we are all here today at this conference. It's a point best said by late Elder Ken Goodwill, as he notes“..the purpose of education is the help students recognize who they are, to see their gifts, talents, and strengths and recognize the responsibility that accompanies these gift, so they can survive, thrive, and contribute as they navigate through both the broader world and Indigenous culture.” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014. Pg. 5)

While this paper has focused on the idea of non-Indigenous people teaching the Indigenous, the most important aspect is the notion of *Indigenous people teaching the non-Indigenous*. Within Australia if we want to develop a greater understanding of our Indigenous peoples, we need to consider the above in serious way.

**References:**

Books:

## [Perso, Thelma Faye](http://find.lib.uts.edu.au/search?N=4294567250). (2015). *Teaching Indigenous students: cultural awareness and classroom strategies for improving learning outcomes*. Crows Nest NSW Allen & Unwin

Goulet, Linda M., Goulet, Keith N. 2014. *Teaching Each Other : Nehinuw Concepts and Indigenous Pedagogies* UBC Press.

## Castree, N. Kitchin, R. Rogers, 2013 *A Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford University Press

Journal Article:

Castagno, A. 2012. "They Prepared Me to Be a Teacher, But Not a Culturally Responsive Navajo Teacher for Navajo Kids": A Tribal Critical Race Theory Analysis of an Indigenous Teacher Preparation Program. *Journal of American Indian Education*. Vol. 51, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3-21

Harfield, S. Hromek, M. 2015. Teaching and Learning Indigenous Knowledge. *Proceedings of the Indigenous Content in Education Symposium 2015*. University of South Australia, Adelaide

McKinley, Brayboy, Solyom & Castagno, A. 2015 Indigenous Peoples in Higher Education. *Journal of American Indian Education*. Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 154-186

Lamb, D. 2014. Aboriginal Early School Leavers On- and Off-Reserve: An Empirical Analysis. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques*. Vol. 40, No. 2 (June / juin 2014), pp. 156-165

Newspaper article:

Mcnally, L. 2016. ‘HSC: Changes to English, maths scaling, greater focus on Indigenous Australia’ *ABC News Online.* Viewed 21st July 2016. (http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-21/hsc-english-history-and-maths-among-curriculum-overhaul/7647768)