**Transforming the knowledge store: The social justice implications of the policy and practice of curriculum renewal**

Arlene Harvey

Learning Centre, University of Sydney, arlene.harvey@sydney.edu.au

Gabrielle Russell-Mundine

National Centre for Cultural Competence, University of Sydney, gabrielle.russell-mundine@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

This paper describes a strategy that involves embedding cultural competence across the curriculum in a large Australian university. Essential to the university’s understanding of cultural competence is a commitment to lift the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, experiences and histories through curriculum renewal. Embedded in the approach to this renewal process is the critical question “what knowledge(s) is important for inclusion in the contemporary curriculum” (Case, 2015). Effective cultural competence is located in a social justice paradigm and requires intentionally creating space for the inclusion of different perspectives. In the Australian context embedding Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum is particularly pertinent and contributes to calls to decolonise the academy, a process which goes to the heart of the question about which knowledges are included. The process of decolonising addresses barriers to the inclusion of non-Western epistemologies and voices and helps to dismantle a system dominated by Western culture and thought. Rather than merely making space for Indigenous knowledges, however, decolonisation requires a genuine valuing of non-Western types of knowledge along with engagement in a new space where one epistemology is not uncritically replaced with another. The ultimate aim, therefore, may not necessarily be to merely add to our current “store of knowledge” (Case, 2015) but to also transform the way in which the store is currently conceptualised. We explore here the opportunities and challenges for our institution and the extent to which disciplines steeped in Western world-views may be willing and able to undergo a potentially radical shift in thinking, e.g. by engaging in emancipatory approaches to critical thinking, incorporating non-problematising approaches to problem-solving (especially around Indigenous issues), and embracing critical self-reflection. We argue that more explicit links between the capabilities required for cultural competence development and our institution’s new graduate qualities will allow for better integration of cultural competence into the curriculum. In exploring the implications of our university’s goal, we consider the importance of action that liberates and ensures that multiple perspectives are heard.  The challenge is how to ensure we, individually and institutionally, effectively engage in this important and overdue social justice endeavour.

Keywords

Cultural competence, social justice, curriculum renewal, Indigenous knowledges, decolonisation, graduate qualities, critical thinking

# Introduction

The context of our paper is a strategy that involves embedding cultural competence across the curriculum in a large Australian university in connection with the introduction of cultural competence as a University wide graduate quality (The University of Sydney, 2015). The main focus of the initial stage of this curriculum renewal is on lifting the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, experiences and histories. Indigenous perspectives are seen as the obvious starting point for cultural competence in our Australian context, to be followed by a move towards a broader approach to cultural competence. Importantly, this work is being implemented under the direction of Aboriginal leaders at the highest levels of the University: the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy and Services) and the Director of the recently instituted National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC), in conjunction with the (non-Indigenous) Deputy Vice Chancellor, Education. It is also being implemented with a view to breadth, depth and sustainability. In exploring the implications of the university’s goal of developing students’ cultural competence, we are mindful that “action that is not guided by thought carries oppression” (Adorno, 2005; McArthur, 2015). Hence in this paper we engage with one of the questions posed by Case (2015) who asks: “What knowledge(s) is important for inclusion in the contemporary curriculum?” We will answer this question with reference to the process of decolonisation of the curriculum and a call from Indigenous academics (Larkin, 2013; Martin, 2008) for a rethinking of the way we position Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum. Here we consider how our existing graduate qualities can offer guidance in how to achieve this.

# Embedding cultural competence as a graduate quality

In Australian universities, Indigenous perspectives are typically included in the curriculum in two main ways: within Subjects in disciplines located within faculties (e.g. Education, Social Work, Anthropology, etc.) or in ‘discipline-like’ Indigenous Studies departments and/or programs which represent “the primary programs for educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in preparation for professional work and future engagement with Indigenous Australians, or for more general understanding of the knowledge, cultures, histories and contemporary concerns of Australia’s First People” (Nakata et al. 2012, p. 121). Like many of our Australian counterparts, our institution includes both approaches. The type of embedding work we are undertaking has been taking place in universities in Australia for decades (Universities Australia, 2011). What is unique is our ‘whole-of-university’ approach that involves a systematic attempt to change the culture of the university, provide cultural competence training for academic and professional staff, and develop our students’ cultural competence by embedding Indigenous knowledges (and broader cultural competence) across *all* faculties’ curricula. Staff training is considered essential to the success of this work as many teachers who will be attempting to embed Indigenous knowledges will be non-Indigenous. Also critical to its success will be recognition that the social justice approach already evident in inclusive teaching and widening participation must be extended to address embedded oppression and Western privilege (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014), a central goal of the NCCC’s approach to cultural competence.

# Transforming the knowledge store

Curriculum renewal from a social justice perspective “requires an appreciation of alternative perspectives and the interplays between these vantage points” (McArthur, 2015). As noted by Case (2015):

It is important for higher education studies to be located in a broader understanding of contemporary society but at the same time important not to lose sight of the very specific role that higher education is mandated to play in society. This specific role is centred on knowledge – on the conservation and transmission of society’s store of knowledge and on the critical engagement with and adding to that store. Higher education is centred on producing highly educated people – students and staff – who are able to grapple with the most challenging questions of the day. (Case, 2015, p. 2)

More than appreciation, conservation and/or transmission – or even critical engagement – we argue that the successful embedding of Indigenous knowledges calls for decolonisation of the curriculum (Sefa Dei, 2012). Decolonisation goes beyond the idea of inclusive teaching or access to the existing system for those traditionally excluded to the idea of system change and the removal of barriers that have effectively silenced or dismissed non-Western voices. Mignolo (2009, p. 3) asserts that “The de-colonial path has one thing in common: the colonial wound, the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as underdeveloped economically and mentally”. The process of decolonisation allows us to begin to overcome the “epistemic injustices” (McLean, 2015; Fricker, 2007) of a higher education system dominated by Western culture and thought despite the increasing diversity of cultures represented in its classrooms. This process will involve identifying where our espoused theories and theories-in-use are out of alignment (Argyris & Shön, 1974) and going further to challenge the appropriateness of these espoused theories. This will very likely involvechanging our ideas about what constitutes the ‘mainstream’ culture in our society (Ranzjin, McConnochie, & Nolan, 2009).

In the Australian context, Indigenous academics are critical of the way in which Universities have engaged with Indigenous knowledges (Larkin, 2013; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Riley et al., 2013). However, the willingness of universities to do so is a clear indicator of their commitment to broader Indigenous education policies (Larkin, 2013). Yet, any approach to curriculum renewal must involve more than merely making space for Indigenous knowledges so as to satisfy compliance demands; rather it needs to involve a genuine valuing of non-Western knowledges and pedagogies and creation of a new space in which diverse knowledges are truly respected (Larkin, 2013; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011). In this process, one epistemology should not be uncritically replaced with another. As Nakata et al (2012) caution, the introduction of alternative Indigenous knowledge positions should adequately reflect the diversity, complexities, contentions, dynamism and contemporaneity of Indigenous knowledges and their relationship to the “ever-changing face of the ongoing ‘Western’ knowledge presence” (Nakata et al, 2012, p. 126). At this challenging “cultural interface” (Nakata, 2007), they recommend a course of action that involves an “open-ended pursuit of knowledge” (Gordon, 2006), or what Kwasi calls “epistemic awakening” (Kwasi, 1995; Mignolo, 2009), and a willingness to “revise all received theories and ideas” (Maldanado-Torres, 2011). While these ideas may have emerged out of consideration of Indigenous Studies as a discipline, they are equally relevant to embedding Indigenous perspectives across disciplines, which can be seen as a logical and natural progression in the decolonisation journey rather than a new project.

All this points to the inevitable question about how non-Indigenous people can decolonise this space. It requires an approach that is respectful and built on the principles of ethical engagement that have long been espoused by Indigenous academics (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2003). It also requires a holistic approach to curriculum development that develops a culture of safe spaces and relational learning from Indigenous perspectives (Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, to appear). Making sense of the history of Western and Indigenous knowledges and their interconnections finds its expression at the individual level in critical self-reflection, where we attempt to understand our individual histories and how these inform our current attitudes, beliefs and practices.

## Decolonisation through graduate qualities

This process may be challenging for many teachers, coordinators, and program directors, who could be dealing with a lack of confidence or experience in working in the cultural competence space and/or who may wonder how their curriculum can be re/developed so as to ‘make room for’ Indigenous or other non-Western perspectives. One way forward may be to examine more closely the interconnections between the graduate qualities articulated in the University’s most recent learning and teaching policy. These are: (a) depth of disciplinary expertise; b) broader skills (critical thinking and problem solving; oral and written communication; information and digital literacy; inventiveness);  (c) cultural competence; (d) interdisciplinary effectiveness; (e) an integrated professional, ethical and personal identity; and (f) influence (The University of Sydney, 2015, p. 6). Rather than thinking of cultural competence as a graduate quality requiring its own set of skills/capabilities, it could be seen as more closely interconnected with the other graduate qualities, whether in the context of a particular Unit (Subject) or across Units (e.g. through curriculum mapping). Our argument is that many of the skills that allow students to develop disciplinary knowledge are the same (or similar) to skills needed to develop cultural competence. At the same time, there is a need to be mindful of where skills can be taught in a disciplinary ‘business-as-usual’ way and where a new approach may be required*.*

### We deal first with the broader skill of critical thinking (and problem-solving) as a way of transforming our knowledge store and helping to decolonise the curriculum. Following a situated approach (McPeck, 1990), we view critical thinking skills as varying according to the “discipline and practice contexts in which the thinking takes place” (Kahlke & White, 2013, p. 12). Critical thinking can include technical (e.g. philosophical, logic, reasoning, argument), humanist (creative thinking, intuition, social constructivism) or emancipatory (critical theory, critical pedagogy) approaches (Kahlke & White, 2013). Some disciplines (or Unit/Subjects within these) rely more heavily on technical, rational and/or problem-solving approaches to critical thinking. For others, challenging received knowledge, subjectivity and/or self-reflexivity may be central to the discipline’s approach to knowledge construction. Still others might emphasise ideology, challenging social structures, and social activism as core to critical thinking within their disciplines (see e.g. Jones, 2009; Nicholas & Habig Jr, 2014).

### As cultural competence, and a decolonising approach in particular, requires the de-privileging of and emancipation from Western knowledge and dominant epistemologies (Battiste & Henderson, 2009), disciplines that have traditionally tended towards more technical approaches to critical thinking (Ahern et al., 2012) may find it difficult to embed Indigenous knowledge in a way that would not be deemed superficial, or even harmful, by Indigenous teachers and students. Disciplines relying heavily on problem-solving need to be aware that in the context of Indigenous knowledges, culture and histories, an application of problem-solving whereby Indigenous peoples themselves are viewed as the ‘problems’ to be solved contributes to ongoing harm, which is the antithesis of what cultural competence is all about (Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, to appear). A decolonising approach recognises that colonisation, and, by extension, colonisers, play a significant role in the problems faced by Indigenous people. This decolonial approach to problem-solving may be potentially confronting but should be applied in such a way as to do no harm to teachers or students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous). Nakata et al. (2012) caution against the ‘quick logic’ of cause-effect, problem-solution, and ‘knowing the answers’; instead, they recommend that students be offered “more language and tools for navigating, negotiating, and thinking about the constraints and possibilities that are open at this challenging interface” (p. 133). This approach can only strengthen students’ critical thinking capabilities and can open up the possibility of enhanced ‘inventiveness’, itself one of the graduate qualities listed above. Moreover, the call to ‘interdisciplinarity’, another of the six qualities, can enhance critical thinking, problem-solving and inventiveness. Interdisciplinary collaboration itself has been viewed as an exercise in cultural competence (Reich & Reich, 2006) where “each discipline must value diversity, develop the capacity for self-assessment, work towards understanding one’s own disciplinary culture, and be sensitive to the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, especially as members of cultural groups in these interactions have different access to power or resource” (p. 54). In interdisciplinary work around Indigenous perspectives and broader cultural competence, students from different disciplines can share not only their varying disciplinary expertise but can also explicitly address their disciplines’ ideas about what constitutes critical thinking and negotiate an appropriate integrated application of these in specific cultural competence related projects. Students from diverse disciplines working together can therefore be offered an opportunity to practice the kind of open and critical thinking described above.

### Related to critical thinking is critical self-reflection which involves “the ability to identify and challenge one’s own cultural assumptions, values and beliefs” (Walker, Schultz, & Sonn, 2014, p. 200; Sherwood et al. 2010). It is based on our ability to understand the processes of socialisation which make up our identities (Di Angelo, 2012). Combined with critical thinking, critical self-reflection allows students to be “open to critical analysis of their own social locations and what these obscure from their view, what remains unarticulated in their language, and what has been absent from their thoughts” (Nakata et al. 2012, p. 135). While critical self-reflection is already better established in many of the professional disciplines (Fook & Gardner, 2006), embedding cultural competence across the curriculum will see this skill become more widespread and embraced in disciplines less prepared for it due to the different disciplinary approaches to knowledge construction. For instance, the critical component in critical self-reflection is more closely connected to emancipatory and humanist approaches to critical thinking than rationalist argumentation and instrumental problem-solving. For advocates of critical self-reflection, looking for ‘solutions’ (no matter how well thought-out) is discouraged in favour of exploring the complexities, ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes in our sense-making (Fook & Gardner, 2006); in critical self-reflection questions tend to be more important than answers. While critical reflection might prepare students to work with Indigenous clients or in Indigenous communities where the focus is on developing and practicing appropriate professional-client protocols, critical self-reflection prepares students by encouraging them to examine their own socialisation and how this influences these professional-client relationships. The ethical aspect of this graduate quality in the context of decolonisation should include a willingness to acknowledge one’s own privilege and power differentials but also to question whose system/s of ethics are at stake.

### Finally, while communication (written and oral) is expressed as a separate skill in our graduate qualities, in an ideal world it might be seen as inseparable from the construction of disciplinary knowledge. It is also through communication that the critical thinking and critical-self reflection enabling cultural competence take place (Harvey, Russell-Mundine, & Hoving, 2016) and communication is also the primary method through which we influence others. However, in our desire to influence others (and engage in persuasive argument, one form of critical thinking), active listening, which is a cornerstone of the meaningful conversation needed for cultural competence, is often neglected (Sherwood et al., 2010). An excellent example of how active listening can lead to persuasion of a type that furthers cultural competence is the process of ‘intergroup dialogue”, as described in Zúñiga, Nagda & Sevig (2002). This approach aims to enhance participants’ understanding of social identity, and at the end of a facilitated process, many participants report they have moved ‘from dialogue to action’ and towards ‘alliance building’, which, in essence, reflects an emancipatory approach to critical thinking, as described above.

# Conclusion

Our institution is one of the few universities in the world that is attempting to embed Indigenous knowledges (as part of cultural competence) university-wide. The initiative has high-level support and work is underway to ensure that staff members (professional and academic) are able to implement the strategy in their varying contexts. The key to the success of this work is transformation at multiple levels, including the system, staff and students (Universities Australia, 2011). At the same time, we need to consider the broader (national and global) context within which our University operates, that is, an internationalised higher education sector that has been “captured by the market discourse” and is beholden to the “neoliberal political project” (Case, 2015). This context can make it difficult to engage in “knowledge and knowing” and “human flourishing” especially when Indigenous and non-Western ways of “being, knowing and doing” are factored in (Martin, 2008). All of our graduates will be called on to solve ‘real-world’ problems in their working lives, regardless of their disciplines. We need to find a way of ensuring, through our curriculum and graduate qualities, that we as educators can work together with our students in innovative ways to create new ways of knowing that can enhance our students’ employability and their human flourishing.

To achieve this we need to ask how those who currently benefit from privilege and an oppressive system can work towards transforming the system. One of the keys to this transformation is critical self-reflection, for students *and* staff, the majority of whom at our University are non-Indigenous. All members of the university (including those in the upper echelons) will need to explicitly acknowledge our own roles and that of our institution in preserving a system that silences non-Western voices and perspectives. Yet, how do we successfully decolonise our world-view, our teaching and our students’ learning? Critics of reflexivity would argue that we can never have a complete understanding of the self (Rose, 1997) and there is always the chance that in reflexivity we are in fact only reinforcing our own world-views. One answer is that we need to guard against a desire for closure or completeness (Nakata et al. 2012) and instead work at this cultural interface with an appreciation for the complexity of this work and to do our best to resist demands for quick solutions and immediate results.

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