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The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education
Volume 46 ▮ Number 2 ▮ pp. 173–181 ▮ © The Author(s) 2017 doi 10.1017/jie.2017.4

Teaching Practise Utilising Embedded Indigenous Cultural Standards

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The Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, is the first university or organisation to enter into the accreditation process with the World Indigenous Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC). Part of that process includes identifying the local cultural standards and protocols that drive and shape our work as a cultural entity. As a result of successfully completing these processes, the course 'Working with Aboriginal Communities', consciously underwent a process of affirmation recognising and embedding where missing, these cultural protocols within our pedagogy and curriculum. Each intake sees students from all disciplines enrol and all benefit greatly from their cultural learning experiences. In this paper, we discuss how these cultural protocols shaped the course material that both online and face-to-face tertiary students experienced, as well, noting the outcomes of this process. Both authors are long-term educators in higher education and have had our teaching invigorated by this experience of critique and reflection. This paper serves to both be a reflective and documentary process for ourselves as well as an opportunity to share our experiences with our colleagues involved in higher education.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous, cultural standards, teaching practise, online teaching

This paper explores the multiple processes of teaching within a consciously constructed and implemented cultural standards framework. To do this, we briefly examine the process of creating our cultural standards document at Wollotuka Institute in consultation with local stakeholders, and the process of embedding and affirming them within one of generalist courses the Wollotuka Institute provides to the wider university cohort. The cultural standards document referred to in the paper aim to reflect and embrace the cultural essence to which our goals are directed and to help define and guide how we operate. The standards also inform the Institute's relationships with students, the community and the university. They also serve to provide a set of principles and standards against which the cultural integrity of our Institution can be monitored reviewed and assessed (Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 41).

The Wollotuka Institute is responsible for academic programmes, research and specific engagement with Australian Indigenous students. In addition, staff also teach a range of Aboriginal Studies-related courses to interested students of the university. This teaching portfolio initially developed from Aboriginal lecturers within the Aboriginal centre working with teacher education students from the 1980s/1990s. This core work remains as crucial work of our unit. We teach students through general Aboriginal Studies courses in the earlier years of their degrees and a compulsory subject for teacher education students is taught at the third year level. Other teaching includes topics such as climate change, human rights and historical and political topics. The Wollotuka Institute teaches both students enrolled in their specialty courses and as well as providing other specialist lectures where required, by the faculties of the university.

At the Wollotuka Institute, we play a pivotal role in the pursuit of self-determination, as well as social and restorative justice for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. At the core of our work is the goal of cultural safety, which we utilise the Williams definition:

> An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

working together with dignity and truly listening (Cultural Safety Training, 2013).

Much has been written on the notion of cultural safety with its origins initially beginning in the health field (Williams, 1999). The term is not to be confused with others, such as cultural competence or cultural awareness, as cultural safety empowers others to be able to achieve their outcomes. For this paper, and indeed in our work, we attempt to use it to create a space where all people can come together in a way that they are both valued and they are safe to identify how they would like without having to justify who they are. Cultural competence is another part of the cultural safety net and can serve to assist increase cultural safety as there is higher chance of a positive outcome when a person's identity is embraced (Kelly et al., 2013; Lenette, 2014). Cultural respect is also linked to cultural competency in that it is the recognition and protection of cultural rights (Kelly et al., 2013). Williams believes that to reinforce the notion of cultural safety, some form of experiential knowledge is essential (1999, p.1). They further suggest that, 'teachers are better able to nurture the learning spirit of students when they understand themselves as life-long learners, validate and learn from their students, and use holistic teaching pedagogies' (Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 63).

As part of its development, the Wollotuka Institute sought to undertake the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) accreditation process. WINHEC Accreditation 'performs a number of important functions including the validation of credibility on the part of the public being served and encouragement of efforts toward maximum educational effectiveness' (WINHEC 2016). WINHEC seeks to test whether an organisation's work

- is framed by the Indigenous philosophy(ies) of the native community it serves,
- are soundly conceived and intelligently devised,
- integrates Indigenous culture, language and worldviews into programing,
- are purposefully being accomplished in a manner that should continue to merit confidence by the Indigenous constituencies being served (WINHEC, 2016).

As per WINHEC's goals, we had to examine closely Wollotuka Institute's cultural practises and understandings and undertook to create a document in which we identified and discussed the local cultural standards at work in our Institute. We went on to engage in a process that included speaking to our local communities through Aboriginal organisations like the local Aboriginal Land Councils and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). Over a number of occasions, we spoke together about local beliefs, teachings and understandings. We explored for instance, which ones should inform us given the physical location of our university sites. We explored where we sit culturally as The Wollotuka Institute as an organisation as well as those individual Aboriginal people who worked in the University including that many whom did not come from local communities. Not only did the staff and local Aboriginal communities involved find the process very enlightening, culturally affirming and enjoyable, we were also able to make the most of the opportunity to discuss how we embed cultural standards into our formal educational institution. In addition, we gained the space to identify and reflect on the ways we had already embedded ideas of cultural safety, protocols and standards over the Wollotuka Institute's 30-year history. As you can see outlined here, the WINHEC accreditation encouraged the furthering and closer articulation of what we did and why we did it. It also allowed for the structured inclusion in a new way of Aboriginal community participation into the core work of the Institute.

In 2015, with much ceremony and celebration, we received our WINHEC accreditation. This had come at the end of a long process including the creation of the cultural standards document, the presentation of the Institute's work at three different WINHEC meetings and the creation and presentation of a self-study. In 2015, the external review team from WINHEC visited the Institute and recommended our initial accreditation be approved. This approval is reviewed periodically and so the Institute has instigated ongoing self-reflective processes.

Embedding the Cultural Standards

Sitting within the academic portfolio, we welcomed the creation of the cultural standards as a formalisation of processes already existing within our work as well as a challenge to identify places for growth. Our Cultural Standards 'reflects the cultural essence in which our goals are directed and help to define and guide how we operate' (Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p.4). We gained the additional opportunity for self-reflection, development and articulation of both the cultural standards and our own practises. It has also meant thinking through and implementing changes from programme accreditation documents through to course curriculum and pedagogy. We have done this through a series of workshops with all Institute staff as well as academic staff specifically working on ways to embed the cultural standards at all the levels previously mentioned. In this discussion, we will more specifically examine our processes of change and reflection with one particular generalist course, 'Working with Aboriginal communities'. As our cultural standards document states, 'Wollotuka has provided unparalleled leadership and has consistently championed the need for academically enriching and culturally affirming education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at a local, national and international level' (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 4).

Our standards state that we in the Wollotuka Institute should create 'a culturally safe and welcoming environment ... for students, staff and community to share

https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and celebrate knowledge of their language, history, culture, values and goals' (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 11). Celebration in this context is understood to represent recognition of knowledges and experiences of Aboriginal people as well as creating space where culture including language can be practised and valued (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 14). Crucial to teaching then is for staff to create the opportunity for students, staff and community to come together in *every* course to fulfil this idea of celebration. As well, Wollotuka has a responsibility for the maintenance of ongoing relationships with past student and their families and communities of origin, supporting both their private and professional lives.

The Wollotuka Institute is a significant employer and safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the University of Newcastle. The Wollotuka Institute has overt policy to only employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and as a consequence of this deliberate employment strategy all the teaching staff involved with ABOR1370 are Aboriginal.

In 2013, after being taught for 10 years, ABOR1370 was given to the authors of this paper to teach. This course is offered both face-to-face at the main university campus at the University of Newcastle and online. All lecture material was prepared and presented by the authors and recorded for the online student cohort. Across the teaching time since 2013, the coordinators and lecturer have remained consistent with the tutorial staff changing for each offering. As such all staff that have worked in ABOR1370 have held very different qualifications and work experiences with a variety of teacher trained and social sciences backgrounds. As Aboriginal people and as long-term academics, we believe we were all very competent to rise to the challenge of creating and implanting this learning and celebratory space.

Our cultural standards document identifies specifically the area of academic and research matters and includes the following statements:

- The utilisation of cultural values and principles that reflect unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges will contribute to the creation of a culturally safe and healthy learning environment.
- Knowledge is acquired through a culturally responsive and embedded process where the knowledge and wisdom of elders and cultural mentors is incorporated throughout the curriculum and within classroom teaching contexts.
- All staff are recognised as conduits as well as knowledge creators for cultural-based teaching as well as other knowledges appropriate to the university context (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 15).

While the document also identifies other points, for this paper, these three aspects are emphasised as they particularly highlight the approach we took in ABOR1370's creation and teaching as well as the perspectives we would like the students to embody in their professional practise.

The course description states ABOR1370:

- Develops an understanding of how Aboriginal communities operate in contemporary Australia.
- The course will provide insight for those wishing to work with Aboriginal communities. The course examines the structure and nature of Aboriginal communities. A holistic approach is used in assessing how political, social and economic dynamics, as well as historical influences and cultural differences brought about by colonisation, have affected contemporary communities.
- The course deals with the process of decision-making, protocols and leadership issues as an integral part of dealing with, and within, modern Aboriginal communities. It will be delivered by oration and talking circles.

To teach this course well and fulfil the course objectives, we needed to expose students to all the topics identified in the course description but from an insider's view. How is it for instance we discuss leadership development within Aboriginal communities from our own personal perspectives? Additionally, what would our elders want us to share or how do we describe it from their perspective? Given the absolute integral place of schools in our communities what do we want them to understand about their own locality? Our cultural standards are very clear that we can have our own perspectives as academics but we must be able to articulate in what ways will us to be the conduits to our community's knowledges. Indeed, how do we balance these responsibilities in a culturally acceptable way and share the pressures with students who will go on to work in our communities?

Overwhelmingly, we had the goal for the course to encourage the development of culturally safe skills and practises in our students so that when they go to work they understand the processes of communities so they become adept workers. How do we create culturally skilled practitioners who achieve more than 'do no harm'? This required a number of changes but crucially the biggest one was to embed the expectation of excellence such an important part of the cultural standards document. We interpreted this as an expectation both for our own academic practise, our cultural practise as well as for students.

Background to Course Material

The specific topics areas covered in this course include colonisation and its effects on communities; communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; protocols, leadership and decision-making processes as well as enacting concepts of respect and reciprocity. In the past, the content had also included discussion of how welfare mentality produces a 'learned helplessness' in Aboriginal communities. There were some problems with

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this content. First, while this may be somebody's opinion that as a result of colonisation Aboriginal Australians have entered what some term 'learned helplessness' it is not necessarily in keeping with our cultural standard of being a conduit for our community's perspectives to state this publicly. Our community would find this an embarrassing representation as it suggests a level of inactivity and passivity many do not agree with. Many of our elders have lived with a very high level of public condemnation throughout their lives and prefer to deal with issues in private. We took the position that we could address the resultant living or psychological conditions created by colonisation by studying 'colonisation and its effects' content area. We take seriously the role we as Aboriginal academics have to build our communities. In this instance, the growth opportunity is creating the learning space for staff, students and community to address the issues rather than blame the community for the existence of the issue in the first place.

Another major challenge was the notion many students hold that Aboriginal people have contributed little to the development of Australian society. This notion was bigger than the responsibility we have for this course work but we responded in part by embedding into the course quality curriculum materials produced by Aboriginal people. There is a growing and valuable body of quality resources addressing the issues covered in the course by Aboriginal authors and we undertake at the development phase of this course each year, a very thorough search for quality resources. In addition, we utilised evidence-based material written by authors (including corporate authors such as the New South Wales Board of Studies), who discuss their learning journey in articulate ways, experienced while working with Aboriginal communities (Board of Studies, 2008).

It was crucial to present as authoritative, knowledgeable while also being 'cultured' in the topics we were discussing. Our experiences as Aboriginal academics were that often students had thought we did not hold degrees or were in a 'special' employment category. This is a very subtle form of racism and requires challenging. By modelling excellence, we are able to resist this form of racism and unblock the learning process for those students. While this paper moves on to discuss exactly how the learning journey of the student was managed, it is important to reaffirm that at all times we work to create culturally specific, credible and academically vigorous course content hence honouring the challenge to do so encompassed in the cultural standards.

Teaching Practise

Students study at the Wollotuka Institute to gain cultural knowledge and work towards achieving cultural competence in their work with Aboriginal communities. In working towards cultural competence, we believe we are equipping students and future workers then to enact processes of cultural safety in their practise. The coursework encourages them to grasp significant cultural community fundamentals and understand the many cultural and appropriate tools that are available to them in order to achieve their goal. This is done through the careful selection of resources, tutorial activities that respond to the lecture material and set readings/resource engagement and the assessments which are topical and a result of recent research. Students are aided in their knowledge of the appropriate standards with language and cultural tensions through the provision of a number of resources including the Aboriginal Cultural Terminology Guide and the University of Newcastle's Netiquette Guide. As a result, students can then successfully gain a sound knowledge of working with Aboriginal communities, which enable them to enhance their skills as competent cultural practitioners whether that is with their own students in the future or in other settings.

Facilitating courses at the Wollotuka Institute can provide many challenges and so professional development and ongoing cultural support with the staff group is essential for staff to create content and teach within these courses. This support enables a sense of cultural maintenance that is guided by the Cultural Standards document. The Wollotuka academic staff meeting regularly and workshop many aspects of this vital work including the managing of difficult situations with complex student needs. Elders in residence and other professional staff can also participate in these discussions.

One aim of good teaching practise is to provide a positive and holistic learning experience that may have a profound effect on a student. Hooks states that:

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. The learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students (1994, p. 13).

The cultural standards document endorses the ongoing training of staff: 'staff are provided with continued professional development opportunities to maintain the highest levels of teaching and research standards' (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 15). By applying the cultural standards as teaching principles, it is possible to highlight, reflect and contribute to the diverse teaching and learning styles that are essential for good teaching practises. Christie and Asmar state that to look through the cultural lens or conceive the epistemology of Aboriginal people means to understand that Aborigines:

> . . . come with unique social and political ways of being and doing, implicating all people who come into contact with them . . . Yet it is not always easy to appreciate the differences between a western academic knowledge system and the

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> systems shared and celebrated by Indigenous people around the world . . .
>
> Learning to be an Aboriginal knower involves learning how to construct, rehearse, implement perform and celebrate knowledge collectively and in place, more than it has to do with specific content (2012, p. 229).

An important factor of successful teaching practise within the Wollotuka Institute is that teaching staff are culturally informed and the ways in which they then pass appropriate parts of this knowledge to their students. The Wollotuka Institute has a critical mass of approximately 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and others throughout the university. These staff are involved across the life journey of Aboriginal people and are actively involved with all issues that involve Aboriginal communities. This knowledge is fluid is a result of a living culture which the academics live themselves. The knowledge that is then imparted and shared is of a holistic nature and informed by living experiences of individuals themselves as well as the utilisation of learning resources. We believe that this holistic approach to education is also an important factor in achieving cultural authenticity. One purpose of holistic education is to prepare students to meet the challenges of life as well as applying knowledge in their own world (Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 63) This exploration encompasses valuable lessons about life as well as developing their own interpersonal skills in areas of emotional and social development, appropriate social behaviour and developing and maintaining healthy community relationships. Although we would like to hope that students have mastered most of these attributes by the time that they enter tertiary education, this can often not be the case and needs to be reflected upon throughout the course. This 'knowledge production' is what makes us accountable to not only ourselves as teachers, but to our students as well.

In the unique space of the online component of 'Working with Aboriginal Communities', learners need to have a positive experience that can not only satisfy and nurture the student's academic need to learn but also create an enriching, engaging and valid learning experience. Anuik and Gillies (2012) state:

> . . . teachers are better able to nurture the learning spirit of students when they understand themselves as life-long learners, validate and learn from their students, and use holistic teaching pedagogies (Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 63).

Honouring these words of Anuik and Gillies (2012), we recognise the online environment can be challenging teaching space for teachers and facilitators new to it. At the core of this challenge is that an environment must be created where students sense they are not 'alone'; that there is actually someone 'out there' going through the learning journey with them. Bender cites Wegerif (2003) who suggests that facilitators can create a sense of an online learning community. This community can serve a number of crucial roles. Creating and maintaining inclusiveness and create a mutual collaborative online learning community, for instance, helps to alleviate student's anxiety about functioning online and entering an unfamiliar space (Kear, Chetwynd, & Jefferis, 2014). When this is done correctly, facilitators are able to create a space where students can readily engage in the content from the beginning of the course and hence maintain levels of engagement. This 'social presence' (as cited in Kear et al., 2014) is vital to the course.

We believe our experience has shown that it is crucial to balancing the teaching environment to put in boundaries and ensure they abided by. These included embedding of resources like an Aboriginal Cultural Terminology Guide and the University of Newcastle's Netiquette Guide. These were developed to give students clear statements of the expectations and standards of behaviour expected for both online and talking with or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. We see this as one way to ensure we are working towards the cultural standards in all aspects of our work. At all times, we must balance the goals we have as educators within the cultural standards with the learning experience undertaken by the students. Christie and Asmar (2012) tell us that students may have feelings of anxiety and resistance about 'political correctness'. Hence, we have identified it as crucial to model the use of course resources and appropriate language very quickly for both online and in face-to-face cohort. This model allowed for students to quickly learn how to create a safe learning environment which exists within the ideals of the cultural standards. While not addressing resistance to political correctness overtly a more subtle approach, according to student feedback, has allowed students to learn what is valued by Aboriginal people. Students then have an opportunity privately to decide on their own value position.

Over the weeks of the course, the students are perceived as increasing in confidence of what constituted appropriate cultural terminology. Online students become encouraged to get 'involved' and create their own social presence, engage with the material and in the lively discussions. There are no assessable items scheduled for the first two weeks to also assist in alleviating online learning anxiety. We were encouraged to see this function as a reminder to students that this first year course it is okay to have some fun within the online environment, maybe 'get it wrong' while learning some new skills.

The terminology skills of the students is carefully modelled, learnt and built upon. This is perceived as very crucial work in this course as many students will do only one 'Aboriginal focused' course. This means the pressure to encourage culturally appropriate behaviours is very present in our minds. Course staff are careful to ensure there is no 'shaming' of the students within the course. Online student's posts during the first two weeks of the course are offered a form of positive feedback by

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the facilitator thereby further enhancing the discussion and the student's willingness to be involved with it. In the face-to-face cohort, students are encouraged to own their comments and discuss information while remaining true to creating and maintaining a culturally safe environment. There are two particular issues in the face-to-face cohort. First, we are assisting in the student's enculturation to university coming perhaps from difficult educational backgrounds and second, perhaps before now students had experienced racism as victims, perpetrators or witnesses. By being aware of this perspective, we actively attempt to encourage some structural understanding of our shared histories.

The cultural standards document states: 'students and staff are deeply respectful of their own cultural identity and those of other cultural backgrounds' (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 9). To add to the goal of achieving cultural safety, we utilise an online network etiquette (commonly known as netiquette). These are the 'golden rules' or dos and don'ts of online communication. There are 10 rules by which to abide by which also include, how to be courteous online as well as some of the informal 'rules of the road' of cyberspace. For example, 'Remember the Human, learning to be aware of what you have written before you post it'. In other words, would you say it to their face? Also, 'Help keep flame wars under control', which suggests that strongly held opinions may be deliberately provocative or offensive, this as part of your studies will not be tolerated. They are not constructive to the learning environment (Centre of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 1). In all offerings of 'Working with Aboriginal Communities', students are encouraged to utilise 'culturally appropriate and safe methods of practice within the learning environment' (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 15). The terminology guide also identifies specific terminology that is deemed culturally inappropriate. This includes derogatory wording that has been used to describe Aboriginal people throughout Australia's history, such as 'half caste' and 'full blood' along with an explanation why certain terminology is inappropriate to use. Some of the material used to encourage this increasing comprehension is material developed and circulated by the Board of Studies in Queensland and New South Wales and other resources that future teachers or other professionals will come across in their daily working life. These rules enable students to interact and engage with each other as well as the course content in a safe, positive and confident manner. Therefore, by the end of the semester, the learnt knowledge comes together with the realisation of the course outcomes ensuring the student could easily put themselves into scenarios with Aboriginal people and communities with confidence. Anuik and Gillies (2012) suggest that all learners have the ability to enquire and learn but the task of the teacher is to establish an environment that evokes an outpouring of critical thought (brain) and passion (heart) as a means to overcome fear (blockage and resistance)' (Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 64).

The cultural standards document states:

> Knowledge is acquired through a culturally responsive embedded process . . . The knowledge and wisdom of Cultural Mentors and Elders is incorporated throughout the curriculum and within classroom teaching . . . Language and culture is integrated into learning and teaching practises to ensure standards of excellence are applied within and outside of our academic programs to strengthen cultural awareness and understanding (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 15).

Setting up the Learning Space: Asynchronous Learning

The learning space of 'Working with Aboriginal Communities' (ABOR1370) is created within the concept of asynchronous learning. In this course, the use of asynchronous learning means that student and facilitator teaching and learning takes place at different times that are convenient to them. Embedding this concept into 'Working with Aboriginal Communities' has allowed meaningful facilitation of the teaching and learning environment both inside and outside of the 'classroom'.

As discussed earlier, one of the ways we have embedded the asynchronous learning has been through the creation of a 'safe space' for students. Initially, this is created via the facilitators in the early weeks of class, modelling all the activities required of students including what journal posts look like and what critical reading of class resources looks like. After this, the students tend to increasing feel more comfortable, safe and less anxious as the weeks progress. This modelling, in turn produces a newly found confidence in the students' understanding of the course content and hence their writing enabling students to engage in the course more deeply and be part of lively class discussions. Modelling is also partnered with welcoming, supportive and encouraging weekly announcements to all students.

Our experience has been that the asynchronous learning has made it easier for staff and online students to liaise outside of 'regular office hours'. Finding a balance of study, work and family can be difficult to juggle, and the availability of online teaching and learning is a good option for many and so exploring teaching in this environment is crucial to ours and the student's success. Part of this is the teasing out of suitable methods of communication with the online student cohort. Indeed, this is crucial to enact both the cultural standards and excellence in teaching practise. Within the online course, one specific mode of contact that is mutually satisfying is 'booking a call' with the student. This is regularly stated as being available to students via weekly course announcements and available from week one if needed. The calls to students can be booked for weekends, at night or whenever suits and need to be mutually agreed upon when booked for both parties. Even though the course is a first year course, many

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students are in their final year of study and often undertaking their final year practicums within their degree disciplines. Nevertheless, many of the course related problems are similar across the student cohort. Therefore, booking a call with the student also provides time for an informal chat and also is a good method to gauge the student's course progress, expectations as well as getting to know them a bit better. This could also mean just choosing students randomly for a conversation about their course progress. The notion of the cultural learning journey is reinforced during this time. The students appreciate this effort being made and their confidence continues to grow. The cultural standards document states, 'individual and diverse learning styles are included within epistemologies (knowledges) and pedagogical (teaching) practices' (2013, p. 15). Therefore, the different teaching and learning styles that are employed in the course are beneficial to all.

Harrington, O'Neill and Reynolds state that:

> Writing is a social activity. There is considerable irony in the fact that many student writers tend to struggle with written assignments in complete solitude. Collaboration on writing projects rarely occurs at an undergraduate level . . . true collaboration requires commitment, interdependency of group members and the suspension of established hierarchies (2011, p. 73–74).

Online students are asked to write a weekly blog discussion. The use of blog discussions is an effective way to engage adult learners. This method encourages students to think, interact with their peers, participate with increasing confidence and reflect critically on their own personal experiences. This enhances and contributes to their own personal learning and growth in the course as well as potentially creating their own safe learning space. By writing weekly with the self-checking of cultural terminology, students are able to acquire the skill of academic writing in a culturally specific way. Each student is allocated to an online tutorial group in which there may be between 15 and 20 students. Practising their written discussion in tutorial groups assists the development of a more casual and comfortable lively discussion space.

But What does Successful Teaching Look Like?

The responses from the students indicated below in the Table 1 are indicative of the success of these processes we have instituted. Upon analysing the responses from successful students, it is clear they have learnt to become more engaged with their peers and more comfortable within the Wollotuka Institute as students.

Anecdotally students report on many of the topics we have discussed briefly in this paper. The quotes used here from students were collected in an evaluative process deisgned for course evaluation and future design. Students provided informed consent when undertaking this survey. Their responses were then de-identified. In relation to cultural safety, a student noted:

> The Wollotuka Institute is like family . . . the level of peace and friendly faces was one of the reasons that I decided to do my minor on Aboriginal Studies (Anonymous Student No. 1, 2014).

It is also clear that students embraced the course concepts and opened their minds to learning about Aboriginal history and engaging with Aboriginal peoples and community:

> . . . I am ending this unit having had a complete overhaul of where I want to go. All of the reading material and videos presented has made me want to not only work with Aboriginal people, but within an Aboriginal community. For so much of my life I cut myself off from the past and was unconsciously racist. I didn't acknowledge Aboriginal Australia. This unit has shown me that the best way to learn about the things I don't know is to go work with the people themselves. I can read a hundred textbooks, but that won't teach me the same way working with Aboriginal people will (Anonymous Student No. 2, 2014).

The cultural standards reflect our teaching ethos and the student learning objectives. We are guided in our work by goals articulated in them which say that the 'utilisation of cultural values and principles which reflect unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges will contribute to the creation of a culturally safe and healthy learning environment'. As always we wonder whether this goal and process filter through to the student experience via our actions and planning. Students reported:

> Reflexivity! That seems to be the key that will help us practice in a culturally safe way. We can only hope to engage effectively with others when we acknowledge our own biases and assumptions. This is . . . one of the hardest things to do - to walk in another's shoes. I truly thought at the beginning of this course that I was sensitive to other points of view and that I was aware of my privileged position as a white person in Australia . . . obviously I can never truly know what it is like to experience racism on a daily basis, but I can try and empathise; to educate myself and by doing so educate others around me . . . hope to spread the message that despite differences in values, beliefs and attitudes and practices, (and that all important skin colour!) that we are all just people who want to be valued and respected for who we are . . . this has been a truly enriching course . . . (Anonymous Student No. 3, 2014).
>
> Undertaking this course has truly impacted on me personally. The course has 'opened' doors to concepts, ideas and issues that I have never heard of, spoke of or even thought of. What I really enjoyed and appreciated . . . was that it made me question myself surrounding these particular ideas when working with Aboriginal people and communities (Anonymous Student No. 4, 2014).

Student responses to the course have been quite positive overall and encourage students to share their newfound knowledge:

https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

TABLE 1

Summary of Online Student Feedback on Course Results 2013–2015 Compared to the University Average

			Support		Teaching		Feedback		Relevance		Satisfaction	
Year	Enrolled	Response	Course	University average	C	UA	C	UA	C	UA	C	UA
2013	103	25%	4.4	4.17	4.36	4.05	3.78	3.84	4.36	4.15	4.12	4.01
2014	124	13%	4.38	4.19	3.88	4.01	3.88	3.82	4.56	4.12	4.0	3.99
2015	93	21%	4.63	4.20	4.26	4.02	4.05	3.86	4.37	4.14	4.47	3.98

> This course has really shifted my views towards working with Aboriginal communities and has been a significant eye opener as to how I can be effectively involved and successfully work in partnership . . . I have become more deeply educated in relation to Aboriginal cultural issues and can relate this to my teaching profession by educating young students of the future (Anonymous Student No. 5, 2014).

It became very apparent that after students applied themselves their journey in working towards cultural competence grew. The most revealing examples from students illustrate how profound learning can be:

> . . . Probably the biggest thing this unit has given me, is a clear sense of where I am going and what I need to do . . . A lot of time I study something and just learn things because I have to, because it is required of me . . . but I was getting bored with them. Not because I couldn't handle them, but because I wasn't engaged. This unit has been different. It has not only held my attention but It has made me want to learn, want to better my understanding. It has made me pay attention to the way I act around Indigenous people and the way the rest of Australia does . . . (Anonymous Student No. 6, 2014).

Clearly, these students had noticed the differences to their own learning experience within this course and how it has assisted their development of working with Aboriginal peoples. These varied student examples help to reveal the results we have experienced from practising both good teaching practises and the benefit of implementing significant meaningful cultural standards.

Conclusion

The creation of the cultural standards document for our Institute challenged academic staff to articulate more clearly their teaching and creation practises that embodied these standards. The other challenge was also the revisiting of all our courses to see if in fact they embodied or met the goals for our learning spaces as described in the cultural standards document:

> The Wollotuka Institute has been able to continue its strong advocacy role by drawing on the strength derived from cultural survival, the communities and people it is connected to and on the commitment and transforming achievements of past struggles and journeys (The Wollotuka Institute, 2013, p. 9).

This paper has described some of the work and provided discussion of the myriad of ways we have worked to embody cultural standards while practising excellence in reflective teaching and student engagement. We see this integration as core to making sure our graduates are culturally safe practitioners within, not only our own Aboriginal communities but in the wider community as well. We model how to engage a range of student learners while at the same time listening to the learners themselves, their home communities, utilise expert material and practise excellence in teaching ourselves. We have documented our journey in this paper to share how we are seeking excellence in our teaching and learning spaces. As always teaching is a challenging business and walking the fine line of putting forward Aboriginal knowledges as valuable and questioning long held beliefs both in face-to-face teaching and online only compounds the challenge. That being given, we love walking that tenuous path with our students.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press