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Difficult Dialogues in the South: Questions about Practice

Special issue: South-South Dialogues: Global Approaches to Decolonial Pedagogies

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This is a reflective opinion piece, on our efforts in Australia to achieve alignment between the goals of Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous studies programmes and decolonising theory for an open and critical dialogue in south–south scholarship agendas. In this spirit, extant approaches to Indigenous studies in the Australian higher education context are questioned, the scholarship recruited for this is challenged, and its advocated role in the education of all students is raised as a major concern.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous studies, decolonisation, critical dialogue

It is been an interesting exercise to reflect on the past 40 years of dialogue on Indigenous studies in Australia and to consider how far we have come in our scholarly endeavours in the southern hemisphere. The breadth of content and the numbers of Indigenous scholars coming through reflects how far and wide we have come in the pursuit of our agendas. I can read across the literature and note the inclusion of our own people's stories and knowledge, and reflect on the struggle to legitimate our voices in the scholarly field of Indigenous studies. I can see clearly the ongoing effort being made to produce historical accounts from Indigenous standpoints. I can see also the results of efforts to mediate the practices of Western systems of thought by drawing in our own knowledge and standpoints. As well, I see what looks like interesting papers concerned with knowledge and practice in various intersections with the disciplines and community contexts. However, if you were to read this literature critically, you can easily get the overwhelming sense of Indigenous studies as a field of applied knowledge for the disciplines and applied knowledge for use in community contexts. Australian Indigenous studies is of course much more than this.

Australian Indigenous Studies

Australian Indigenous studies today constitutes a field of inquiry related to the past, present and future of Indigenous people and societies. Indigenous scholarly inquiry and production emerges at the interface of

(i) Indigenous people's traditional and contemporary knowledge, experience and analytical standpoints,

(ii) the representations of these as they have been historically constructed by the Western disciplines, as well as

(iii) the ongoing Western knowledge, methods and practice that continue to impact on Indigenous lives and shape Indigenous options (Nakata, 2007, 2010, 2014).

All these sources and their points of convergence into the contemporary space provide rich content for the development of Indigenous studies scholarship. The field of inquiry is therefore wide as well as deep. It is transdisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary, and engages a field of complexity like no other. Indigenous studies programmes and courses at the higher education level should ideally reflect this complexity and the range of propositions, arguments and contests to be found there. Such programmes and courses, as a result, should be interesting,

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thought-provoking and intellectually challenging for students. For most of us however, teaching and learning in Indigenous studies is a fraught and difficult task. Often, non-Indigenous students tend to be emphasised as the challenge for teaching rather than the complexities that constitute Indigenous realities in contemporary situations and the content of Indigenous studies curriculum.

In recent papers, I have engaged some of the limits of Indigenous practice in higher education, for example, in Indigenous research (Nakata & David, 2010), in Indigenous scholarly practice (Nakata, 2013), in Indigenous archival memory (Nakata, 2012), in Indigenous student learning support areas (Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008) and in Indigenous studies programmes (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). In each of these papers, I have implicated the limits of our forms of theorising and analysis as significant in setting limits to our current practices. My central argument has been that Indigenous critical analysis in these areas continues to prioritise a focus on the shortfalls of Whitefellas, their governments, their institutions, their academic disciplines, their knowledge and their everyday practices. For good reasons, our self-determination agendas to ensure all Indigenous Australians have stronger and better futures are assumed in this activity. But the infinite possibilities of the self-determination agenda appears to be sidelined in the sometimes obsessive attention given to resisting the nation state, getting White people to repent or acknowledge guilt, and re-instating Indigenous ways of doing and relating things. In my view, if this continues to be the central focus of our advocacy and scholarship in the South, then many other opportunities to ensure Indigenous Australians have stronger and better futures will continue to fall away.

A major problem is that we are yet to develop a productive critical discourse for examining the implications of our own thinking in the go-forward plan. Critical analysis or even constructive questioning of Indigenous propositions too often results in quite unproductive reactions. But:

> for forty years now, Indigenous people have been visibly active, we have constructed analysis, deployed logic, made arguments, advocated proposals for change, and developed practices of our own. What we do should be considered significant enough to deserve review and evaluation by us. Why is it not part of our agenda? (Nakata, 2013, p. 291)

Here, I pose some hard questions around the basis for common approaches to the teaching and learning of Indigenous studies in Australian universities. I want to question particularly the alignment between the goals of (a) Indigenous self-determination, (b) Indigenous studies programmes and (c) the role of decolonising theory in our work.

One concern I have is that some approaches to the transmission of Indigenous content in undergraduate courses encourage a direct translation of Indigenous collective goals and grievances into the project of educating others. In the process, the quality of the educational engagements associated with the design and delivery of course offerings is sutured over for a particularly narrow mission. As a result, in some places, teaching students about Indigenous people, histories and cultures invariably runs the risk of becoming mostly an Indigenous therapeutic exercise, when it should be an educational exercise that can develop undergraduate students' understanding of the complex challenges facing Indigenous people into the future, as a result of the legacy of colonialism, now left to us to resolve.

Underlying this concern, however, is a larger one that links to the relationship between scholarly inquiry and the way we introduce students to the field of inquiry. These bear upon each other over time. What, for instance, happens to Indigenous studies when the teaching of it in universities is so focussed on reaching larger numbers of students and engaging them in Indigenous courses of quite limited scope and depth? What happens if the low numbers of students taking Indigenous majors or specialisations fail to grow? What happens if the courses in majors begin to include or reflect the more limited approaches of intense courses? What are the implications for a field of 'specialised' inquiry that grows ever wider in its reach into multidisciplinary intersections and ever more diverse Indigenous community contexts?

Indigenous Studies in the Higher Education Context

The education of all Australians on matters Indigenous has been recommended in numerous reports and reviews over the years. In universities, we have made great strides to improve students' understanding of Indigenous people as these might apply to their future professional practice or civic responsibilities. The importance of this is not in dispute. How to achieve it though has not been so straightforward.

Today, there are following four discernible approaches in the higher education sector:

1. The original and traditional disciplinary approach for specialisation, which is Indigenous studies electives and major and minor sequences offered through humanities faculties, schools of Indigenous studies and Indigenous centres.
2. Embedding Indigenous content in the disciplines, where this is relevant in a particular course or programme. More recently, this call is being urged across all disciplines.
3. Mandatory stand-alone preservice courses in the key professions that impact Indigenous future wellbeing, such as education, health, etc.

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4. Cultural competency frameworks through professional development of staff and the development of graduate attributes.

It requires a closer audit to know exactly what proportion of undergraduate students take Indigenous studies electives, minors or majors. From experience, the number of students who end up in majors has generally been small. Thus over the years, the push has been to embed Indigenous content across existing curriculum areas in the relevant disciplines and to mandate courses in the key preservice education for the professions — so students at least get something even if they do not enrol in sequences that lead to majors. When Indigenous content is embedded and when courses are made mandatory, large student cohorts are not voluntary. Students of course do enter preservice programmes for the key professions voluntarily but that does not necessarily mean they embrace Indigenous content. We invariably see students in mandated courses today who are not necessarily motivated or interested, and it is often reported that they are reluctant to learn about Indigenous issues. Indeed, we have come to expect that a proportion of non-Indigenous students will be ignorant, biased, resistant, insensitive, racist or troublesome.

There is a growing amount of research, and descriptions of practice in theses and academic journals that has generated a sub-field of teaching and learning in Indigenous studies. In this, the field is an applied one. A central focus in the discussions about teaching is how to engage non-Indigenous students. And so, much attention focuses on pedagogy, or how best to teach them. Within this, a central focus is how to convey concepts and values from the perspective of Indigenous people's traditional and contemporary experiences and practices. And further within this, how to bring non-Indigenous students to an awareness of their own 'social located-ness' and how this links to biases in their thinking. Indeed, a section of the growing conversations in the literature appears to accept, as a basis for teaching and learning, that non-Indigenous students embody the ongoing colonial systems of dominance that continue to oppress Indigenous people.

A major challenge in teaching and learning discussions in Australian Indigenous studies is not just how to engage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in shared teaching and learning spaces. A major challenge for academics is decision-making around what students need to know, and how to get them 'to know it' and 'accept it'. The concern about what students should know is intensified in the more recent inclusive approaches of embedding content in the disciplines, mandatory preservice courses, and approaches to cultural competency. This concern about what students should know and how to teach them in these courses is not quite the same as introducing students to a field of inquiry, its histories, its concepts, its methods, its systems of thought and its different areas of investigation.

In our current approaches, we all agree that the purposes of educating students are singularly instrumental ones, namely to familiarise students with Indigenous issues and perspectives so that as future professionals they can respond more appropriately and effectively in their practice. This aim and these approaches introduce a certain urgency to the task of educating undergraduate students. How, for example, in a 12-week course, in one semester, are preservice education students to understand and appreciate the relevant histories, socioeconomic and cultural issues, and the diversity of these that will present in their future classrooms? How are they to acquire enough knowledge and improve their capacity to respond in educational terms to the individual needs of Indigenous students when they graduate as teachers?

In embedding perspective approaches, the issues are even more challenging because embedding implies that academics in the disciplines must often be the ones to draw in content into already established courses that might otherwise overlook specific attention to Indigenous issues. Non-Indigenous academics who want to do the right thing are often fearful of getting it wrong and doing more harm than good. They often ask — 'tell me what to do, tell me how to do it'. Many, of course, still do not see the relevance of Indigenous issues to what they teach and still regard these calls as 'noise'.

The cultural competency framework is currently unrolling across universities but similar issues arise around who is to do it and what will constitute cultural competency programmes or attributes. For example, will a graduate attribute for Indigenous cultural competency mean anything if it is simply a 'tick off' process in course accreditation or course outlines? The whole concept of cultural competency is laudable as an aspiration but questionable as an achievable outcome, in my view. For example, from a staffing perspective in a university of 6,000 staff how will this be done? With a 10% transition of staff each year, how will we provide for 600 new staff who are not recruited at the same time? Yes the work that goes towards making non-Indigenous people competent in Indigenous areas is important but we also need to keep in mind our own priorities. How for instance will we balance the work needed for the competency agenda with the time needed for our own self-determination agendas, to get our own students through, to build our own Indigenous staff capacities, to prepare Indigenous graduates for work, to close educational gaps, to break poverty cycles, to contribute to Indigenous studies scholarship?

But the larger teaching and learning question here is as follows: Does the sort of reduced understanding of complex intersections of knowledge and practice that can be presented through these approaches do anything more than raise awareness of Indigenous people and issues? Does a little learning sow the seeds of better practice or does it merely extend the historical problem and maintain the *status quo*?

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Those academics that work hard to promote and trial embedding, mandatory or cultural competency approaches do report their practices in the literature and at conferences each year. But these approaches, as propositions for the educational remedy of Australian students, do not receive much critical examination in the broader sense. For example, there is little examination of the trend to blanket the academic arena with calls to embed Indigenous knowledge, when it is not at all clear what constitutes good educational practice in relation to Indigenous knowledge or embedding approaches. If we advocate and work so hard to implement these approaches, there must be some view to critically examine these propositions and rigorously evaluate their effectiveness as educational practice.

In these latter three approaches, the time-frame limits the scope of teaching and coverage of issues. Very complex fields of practice — for example, in health, education and law — are pared down to what is surmised as the essentials. Issues then emerge around choices that have to be made in course designs.

- How to compress course content if students are deemed to have to understand as much as possible about Indigenous cultures, colonial history and contemporary aspirations and goals in a very short time?
- What content to select to have the greatest impact on students in a very short time?
- What teaching approaches to use in these circumstances?
- And how to assess students' knowledge and competency after such a short period of learning?

These concerns emerge in the teaching and learning areas in Indigenous studies and for higher education generally, most often contextualised within descriptions of practice, which are almost always grounded in propositions linked to Indigenous purposes and goals; that is, the goal to educate undergraduates as future professionals or citizens, as well as the goal of self-determination in the interests of Indigenous futures. These links however are not always explicitly stated but always implied.

Teaching and Learning Practice in Indigenous Studies

Clearly, there is a direct relation between the educational content of courses and the field of Indigenous studies scholarship which is available to draw on. But there is also an implied relation between the educational content of courses and academics' own preferences. In Indigenous studies, as with other courses, academics' decisions in course design are not just educational or intellectual choices but they are also political ones. And in the main, our choices purport to uphold the interests of Indigenous political self-determination agendas. But what conceptual interpretation of self-determination is expressed in these educational choices is rarely explored, theoretically or in their effect.

I know I am not alone when I say that what passes in the name of self-determination today is more often the defence of the politics of difference and cultural rights. In academia, a much fuller exploration of the possibilities for self-determination should ideally place concern for improving the life circumstances of all Indigenous Australians, ahead of our politics of difference. In the education of all students, such a concern requires teaching and learning practices that hold open all the possibilities that are present when the propositions of Indigenous and Western theorising are made available for examination. Scholarly examination must therefore begin to historicise and contextualise any proposition within the field of inquiry, rather than routinely subject the analysis of any proposition to a simplistic point of difference. As it is, the tight alignment between this simplistic difference agenda and Indigenous studies courses as the instrument for educating all Australians sits behind everything we do and practise in teaching and learning contexts. And yet, this politics of difference is rarely theorised as part of the problem of Indigenous intellectual orthodoxy. Nor are our allegiances to this politics often perceived to be implicated in the production of Indigenous practices that maintain the *status quo* for us as subjugated people.

Currently, these and other concerns associated with teaching and learning frameworks for Indigenous studies are not being greatly discerned, let alone discussed or debated.

Decolonising Approaches and Education in Indigenous Studies

A field of assumptions underpins the links between the politics of difference and the way it is given expression in the education of future professionals about Indigenous people and issues. A favoured mediator between these two activities in the academic context is decolonising approaches. Decolonising approaches are widely recruited as a theory of education and re-deployed as a pedagogical practice. Such approaches become an educational orientation when they are used — explicitly or implicitly — as a philosophical framework for teaching and learning. And these become a pedagogy when used to differentially position Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as subjects and objects of teaching and learning. At the higher education level, students should engage decolonising theory as one of many available theoretical explanations of the colonial predicament. But this should be on the basis of its intellectual propositions rather than its appeal to a particular politic. The redeployment of such approaches as an educational framework is not currently being questioned but it is hard to understand why this is so in the academic arena.

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Decolonising approaches centralise Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in the effort to deal with the dominant Western presence in the way we now understand Indigenous realities. Linda Smith's treatise — the primary reference in use in Australia — focussed on Indigenous research methodologies — that is, on the modes and methods of inquiry that become available when the assumptions of Indigenous worldview are given primacy in social inquiry. Affording primacy to Indigenous understandings of social reality brings into question the assumptions of Western knowledge, which effectively work to universalise European thought and reason as the ideal and global human system of thought. Decolonising knowledge, then, also involves a distinct ongoing form of Indigenous knowledge making for use in contemporary contexts. This is achieved by reclaiming and reconstructing Indigenous traditions subjugated by colonialism. This is a critical and productive area of theorising.

However, it is not at all clear that framing the project of educating students through the decolonising lens is the best approach for enabling students to appreciate or navigate the complexities that now challenge understandings of our social realities and how to improve their conditions. As a proposition for framing teaching and learning, this lens does provide an entry point for students to interrogate the Western narrative and to engage in an Indigenous counter-narrative. As reported in the literature, however, decolonising as a *de facto* education theory often instates and privileges particular forms of logic and analytical practice as 'the preferred' Indigenous ones. Students are positioned to critique the Western narrative but also to accept without question the Indigenous counter-narrative, however it is reworked as the basis for developing more appropriate practices for Indigenous contexts.

In some contexts, not only are Indigenous knowledge meanings often reconstructed and applied without sufficient understanding of the immense difficulties of working with epistemological and ontological differences. But also, the effects of 200 years of engagement between Indigenous and Western meanings are not considered to complicate the task. In many accounts, these new forms of Indigenous knowledge are assumed to be a higher 'truth', and there to be asserted. However, if truth be told, often those involved in this work in the Academy do not understand the extent to which they are involved in the dis-integration and trivialisation of Indigenous knowledge traditions. Decolonising knowledge work as it is occurring in academia is a fundamentally different process from those processes through which traditionally oriented people work to integrate or make use of outside or Western knowledge meanings.

This has consequences for Indigenous studies as a field of inquiry. When the conditions of decolonising knowledge production in the academy are not made transparent, and when these conditions are placed beyond the reach of critical analysis, this effort at knowledge production mystifies the politics of its production in similar ways to the Western disciplines. What the Caribbean scholar Lewis Gordon has noted as 'the decadence of the disciplines', can also signal caution for the field of Indigenous studies if we do not pay more attention:

> Instead of being open-ended pursuits of knowledge, many disciplines have become self-circumscribed in their aims and methods in ways that appear ontological. By this I mean that many disciplines lose sight of themselves as efforts to understand the world and have collapsed into the hubris of asserting themselves as the world (Gordon, 2006, p. 8).

But this practice also has consequences for the teaching and learning of Indigenous studies. Some of these efforts have entered Indigenous studies programmes and courses, not just as authoritative 'truths' but as the only ideologically correct way to move forward in practice. Without an adequate array of critical tools for engaging such efforts at decolonising knowledge, students in Indigenous Studies — and regrettably some academics as well — cannot explore these propositions and the arguments for practice that are invested in them. They must take them on faith as a better basis for practice in Indigenous contexts, because they have been authored by Indigenous people.

Also of concern to me, however, is the use of decolonising positions as pedagogy. Critical Race Theory and Whiteness theory have both been used as pedagogical techniques for bringing non-Indigenous students to an awareness of their privileged location and as the beneficiaries of raced systems of dominance. Here again, we can say that these are useful and central forms of analysis for students to engage and explore and there is much to be gained from doing so. But when used as a teaching practice, non-Indigenous and Indigenous students are differentially positioned, as the ongoing embodiments of colonial oppression and Indigenous victimhood, respectively.

Non-Indigenous students are assumed to be blind to their privileged and raced identities and become objects of teaching to be worked on and reoriented. In one mandated 12-week course described in the literature, the entire first module contained no course content about Indigenous Australia. Instead, the premise was that non-Indigenous students needed first to engage in a programme of self-examination and the module was devoted to that. In this case, no matter what efforts they made, students stood to be condemned for any evident failures in their learning over time. Surely, as Indigenous people who have resisted the attempted erasure of our identities, we should understand the resistance of non-Indigenous students to threats on their primary identities. Where are our critical faculties for interrogating our own practices?

A milder version of this practice is much more widespread. This is the differentiation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in shared classrooms, which occurs by the tacit acceptance of teaching designed to affirm Indigenous students, while teaching to challenge and unsettle non-Indigenous students. In this approach,

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difficult or emotional discussions are able to be avoided by a practice of deflecting non-Indigenous students' difficult questions and placing some sensitive issues out of bounds. Teaching and learning that avoid these difficult discussions defer to the politics of difference. It does not serve Indigenous students either.

Such teaching and learning is unlikely to lead to the development of language and discourses for future professionals to excavate the middle ground of a highly polarised contest. Yet, these are the grounds that students, including Indigenous students, will be expected to traverse as future professionals. Instead, in these engagements in higher education, students are expected to participate in critical analysis to interrogate 'the Western' in order to uphold 'the Indigenous'. While they should be exposed to this, without deeper explorations, the lines between these are not clear or certain, and whose interests ultimately prevail is not always evident on the surface of these contests.

By not engaging with its own theoretical limits, efforts to decolonise Indigenous knowledge production have developed a practice of skipping over the complex entanglements that constitute the myriad layers of the interface between Western and Indigenous meanings. Attention is placed on the divergences between these meanings with a consequence that not enough attention is placed on the significance of the convergences of these traditions in any contemporary sphere of practice.

Breaking through the Barriers of Colonising/Decolonising Approaches

An alternate proposition is that effective teaching strategies for the exploration of contemporary complexities are ones that provide students with more language and analytical tools for navigating, negotiating and thinking about the constraints and possibilities that are open at this challenging interface. Here, the basis for engaging students in colonial critique is to stress the legacy of a very complex and historically layered contemporary knowledge space — to stress the workings of knowledge production about Indigenous people and situations and to stress the implications of convergences.

The Western corpus 'about' Indigenous people confines contemporary Indigenous understandings of what it means to be Indigenous today. Past and present efforts to improve understanding have always moved in accordance with past and ongoing trends in the social sciences. To understand these complex entanglements requires quite measured attention, not just from non-Indigenous students but also from our Indigenous students. I suggest that by encouraging students to focus on the conditions of the Indigenous arguments, in their relation to the conditions of Western theorising, students can be led to develop awareness of the limits of all standpoints being brought to bear on the contemporary situation of Indigenous people. This includes

- an awareness of the persistent pervasiveness of 'all knowing', 'taken-for-granted' Western frames and what these obscure from view;
- an awareness of the inversion of those frames in Indigenous analysis and some of the limits of that; and
- an appreciation of just how intricate and open to interpretation of the dance around worldview, knowledge and practice is as a result.

Here, in the descriptions just given, Indigenous Studies as a field of inquiry, as a corpus of developing knowledge, and as an area of undergraduate study bear down upon each other. Each is implicated in what the other can produce. One unspoken concern I raised today is what happens to Indigenous studies as a field of inquiry and further study, when the teaching of it in universities is so focussed on reaching larger numbers of students and engaging them in Indigenous courses of quite limited scope and depth? I also asked, what happens when courses open up to students a fuller range of theoretical and practical possibilities for Indigenous people, only to close them down to conform to the politics of difference? What is the academy for, if not to encourage questions and explorations at the limits of our knowledge and our chosen practices? How can we, as Indigenous people, wield so much influence in the field of inquiry, without reflecting on the absence of engagements to scrutinise our own propositions?

In the field of Indigenous higher education studies, the literature is replete with opinion pieces directed towards advocacy. It is replete with descriptions of educational practice that evidence a following of Indigenous advocacy lines rather than critical engagement of the assumptions of those propositions. Without more critical engagement, we promote what we have now: A lack of discernment between the worthiness of various propositions put forth in advocacy and in scholarly agendas; and a certain contentment to stay safely within the current discourse rather than test and breach its limits in the interests of reinvigorating thinking for enhancing the life circumstances of everyday Indigenous people. Anything Indigenous flies, it would seem.

To be satisfied with equating the politics of difference to that of self-determination is to fail to see how the day-to-day elements of the ongoing colonial presence have constructed our opposition. I think Indigenous people deserve to have a more thoughtful interpretation of the infinite possibilities of self-determination in our teaching of Indigenous studies courses in universities.

Unless we as academics are prepared to engage more deeply the complexities to be found in the field of inquiry we are evolving, we will never feel comfortable discerning the worth of students' engagements with content and concepts, we will never feel comfortable managing

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difficult discussions in Indigenous Studies classrooms. And if we do not take on difficult discussions that might at first glance be perceived to be caused by 'resistant students' interrogating our assumptions, we will not find the language or the critical tools to assist ourselves and our students to engage the field more deeply and explore the possibilities more fully. And if we do not do that, we do not produce thinkers who can negotiate and deal with complex convergences of Indigenous and Western systems of thought and understanding to take future scholarship forward. And if we do not take thinking in these complex intersections forward, we desert the very people whose agenda we espouse to be at the front and centre of our courses. We will continue to imprison our own emancipation agendas if we do not open up the space for the difficult dialogue vitally needed to get us to another place, to a fresh beginning, to a reinvigorated Indigenous standpoint for recalibrating a fresh approach to liberating ourselves from colonial predicaments.

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