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A Discussion With Sandy O'Sullivan About Key Issues for the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network

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This article takes the form of an interview with Sandy O'Sullivan, who is a partner on the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network, about key issues that have arisen through Network discussions. She is a Wiradjuri woman and a Senior Aboriginal researcher at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. O'Sullivan emphasises the strengths of the Network and difficulties the Network participants have had in defining 'Indigenous Studies'. She also discusses the important work for the Network to do into the future, to continue to strengthen relationships between educators and improve teaching and learning of Indigenous Studies at tertiary level.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous Studies, networking, tertiary educators

Variously described as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary, Indigenous Studies in Australian higher education today exists to provide Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with an understanding of the 'knowledge, cultures, histories and contemporary concerns of Australia's First People' (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012, p. 121), and to equip them for working and engaging in an appropriate way with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Indigenous Studies is an expanding discipline in universities across Australia, and is an important contribution to teaching students about Australia's colonial history; it benefits both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students by teaching them about Australia's rich cultural heritage (Nakata, 2004; Craven, 1999, pp. 23–25). Such teaching and learning seeks to actively deconstruct historical and contemporary engagements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and, in doing so, help build better working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

A number of educators have written about the complexities of teaching Indigenous Studies to diverse tertiary students. For example, Konishi, Lui-Chivishe, and Slater (2008) note that in their experiences teaching a large introductory Indigenous Studies course, 'it was no easy task to convey to young non-Indigenous Australian students the particular history and experience of Indigenous Australians' (2008, p. 1; see also Blaskett, 2009; Hook, 2012). Further, they emphasise that teaching Indigenous Studies 'requires you to give yourself over to students in a way that is unimaginable in many other tertiary subjects' (2008, p. 2). Diverse teaching and learning approaches in Indigenous Studies are also explored by some educators. For example, Norman (2004) investigates the use of a case studies approach as an effective teaching strategy in tertiary Indigenous Studies. The use of critical pedagogy is examined by McGloin (2008), who notes that 'teaching of Aboriginal Studies involves a struggle to decentre self-interest by foregrounding collaboration, unity, and community as central tenets of a developing pedagogical praxis' (McGloin, 2008, p. 83). Nicoll (2004) demonstrates how 'critical whiteness theory can be used to shift the pedagogical focus from the racialised oppression of Indigenous Australians to the white middle-class subject position that is a direct product of this oppression' (Nicoll, 2004). The use of Problem-Based Learning and reflexivity is explored by Bradley (2012) to stimulate in students an awareness of, and engagement with, Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous perspectives on activities undertaken on Country. Elsewhere, Barney and Mackinlay (2010) explore various ways of incorporating and enhancing reflection in teaching and learning Indigenous Studies through PEARL (Political, Embodied, Active, and Reflective Learning) as

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a teaching and learning approach to transform student's understandings about Indigenous issues, histories and cultures (Mackinlay & Barney, 2012; also see Mackinlay & Barney in this volume).

With an understanding of the diverse approaches to teaching Indigenous Studies discussed above, in 2011 the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network was established to develop a focused national network of scholars to engage in key discussions about teaching Indigenous Studies at tertiary level. The Network provides an important platform from which scholars can share and discuss teaching and learning processes within Indigenous Studies. One of the central aspects of the Network is that it has created a space for dialogue about teaching and learning Indigenous Studies. Continuing in this vein, I sat down with Sandy O'Sullivan to discuss what she saw as some of the critical issues raised in the Network. O'Sullivan is a partner in the Network and her role has been to attend four Network meetings over 2012–2013 and participate in the National Workshop held in October 2013. She is a Wiradjuri woman and a Senior Aboriginal researcher at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. I start by asking O'Sullivan why the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network is important for tertiary educators in Indigenous Studies:

O'Sullivan: I think at a fundamental level, we do need some consistency and understandings across the sector about what we mean when we talk about Indigenous Studies. I think there can be a fear that a network or standards will result in a reductive discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, but it's telling that our discussions have been more about opportunities to include information, ways that we can reapply local and specific knowledge, and a more expansive way of thinking about the study of the lives and ways of Indigenous Australians.

Barney: One of the issues we've explored through the Network is how to define 'Indigenous Studies'. Can you talk about the complexities of this?

O'Sullivan: Most higher education institutions across the country have at least one program that is defined as Indigenous or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies. Unlike other fields, these programs have often come from a variety of discipline areas ranging across health, education, social sciences, politics, the arts, humanities — and sometimes with multiple starting points — within the same institution. Those of us who have been working across the field understand that this has happened more organically than by design. Often it is where there have been research or teaching strengths, and where there has been a need and opportunity that either the community/ies or the university has led. This presents a particular problem for discussing 'Indigenous Studies' as an all-encompassing concept, and I'm happy to report has resulted in a vigorous discussion at our Network meetings.

Barney: Yes, definitely, we've had some really great dialogues in Network meetings, which have highlighted the diverse range of views, practices and experiences in Indigenous Studies. What do you think are the strengths of the Network?

O'Sullivan: The diversity and knowledge of the participants. It's important to note that it is not only made up of very small institutions like my own, and very large institutions like the University of New South Wales and The University of Queensland, but also that we come from a range of discipline areas. Wilin Centre at University of Melbourne, for instance, represents creative fields that intersect with Indigenous Knowledges but would never be framed as 'Indigenous Studies'. They have provided a constant reminder that we are not writing Indigenous Studies 101 in a social science or humanities context, but instead considering what material and support information would be helpful for anyone at higher education institutions in curriculum development that supports a better understanding of our Peoples.

It is an appropriate measure of this diversity that the Network has been facilitated by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT). The OLT is a unique space that supports important initiatives across the entire sector. We all have our own institutional imperatives and they matter in carving out our path and providing a meaningful and unique experience for our students. But it can mean that an individual institution has a focus primarily on their own internal development. A network like this is important, because it doesn't privilege a single institution or perspective, but can sit above them and provide broader and meaningful contexts for supporting the sector.

We started to use the language of 'perspectives' over 'studies' during Network meetings, and this reflects some issues with the idea that the gaze is often *on* our Peoples and not *by* our Peoples. It would certainly be interesting to see how this might impact across the curriculum and not just in the area that might be defined as 'Indigenous Studies'. Have these strengths been evident for you in the reporting onto the OLT? Were there others?

Barney: Yes, I think the Network has definitely highlighted diverse perspectives about defining, teaching and developing Indigenous Studies, and this is something I've reported back to the OLT. I think the collaboration between the universities involved is another real strength and this was made possible through OLT funding for Network meetings, as well as through the National Workshop. One issue that I noticed came up through our discussions was the need to be clear on the separation between teaching Indigenous Studies and teaching Indigenous students. Yet, as Nakata notes, the two 'are not entirely separable' (2006, p. 266). Another question I've been thinking about

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is whether the Network can engage further with the recommendations of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012)?

O'Sullivan: I could go through nearly every recommendation in the Report and find a way in which the Network responds to it, primarily because nearly every one of the 36 recommendations are about greater agency, support and involvement in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The Network has been all about providing that; it's one of the reasons why it is not creating a structure where there is a 'right' way to teach Indigenous Studies. How could there be, when we — as academics — are all so different, and where we — as Peoples — need a variety of perspectives worked into the curriculum?

The recommendations from the Review certainly spoke to supporting the tertiary education aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; in particular, in supporting work across the disciplines, in improving our participation numbers, and in creating supportive spaces that encourage an understanding of Indigenous perspectives. That underpins all of the work of the Network in thinking through our capacity to respond to the community imperatives, individual program interests in seeding relationships across the sector, and in creating a space where new and revised programs can understand what is happening, and what the challenges are, across the sector.

Barney: What about the challenge of mapping Indigenous Studies across universities? We have talked about this in Network meetings as a possibility and we have done this on a small scale at some of the individual institutions involved. Do you think this could be an important task for the Network?

O'Sullivan: Yes, and not just for those already involved in the Network. We'll grow as a Network and as a space for learning about the sector when there can also be contributions across the disciplines. It was clear in the early days of the Network that even our well-connected participants were not across the business of every institution, and so we can anticipate that this is an important exercise in understanding what already exists, opportunities for growth, niche work being done in the sector, and how each of these programs intersects with other programs across their institutions.

Barney: That's right, and some of the partners have discussed in Network meetings that mapping courses across universities could assist with the OLT work on the Higher Education Standards Framework and defining threshold (or core) learning outcomes for disciplines. You are strongly involved in the OLT as an Australian Teaching Fellow and an assessor of applications. What kinds of teaching and learning projects do you think could strengthen the teaching and learning of Indigenous Studies in Australia?

O'Sullivan: Being an enduring Australian Teaching Fellow has been a wonderful opportunity to work across the sector. Assessing programs of funding and programs that are underway has provided a lens into just how innovative some programs really are.

So many of the projects that have been developed over the last decade have these wonderful outcomes that are accessible and involve reports and strategies that are intended to work across the sector and across disciplines. I do worry that people in the Indigenous Studies area are not always aware of these programs. For instance, I have an ongoing project on the ways that non-traditional research outcomes can support Indigenous students enrolled in research higher degree programs, and we produced a report and some resources out of this. Similarly, my colleague and Australian Teaching Fellow, Christine Asmar, has developed a set of resources for Indigenous Teaching at Australian Universities (www.indigenousteaching.com). There are hundreds of programs, projects and resources that have been produced that can provide support for curriculum development across all disciplines.

The programs that we are hoping to see will be programs that respond to the sector, that incorporate and build on the many reports and work already accomplished, and where there is a burning need for this work. Again, the real strength of the Office for Learning and Teaching is that it works across the sector and encourages the development of resources and ways of engaging curriculum that no single institution would be able to undertake. For small institutions like mine, this is invaluable. But for larger institutions or programs, this can mean consolidation and a set of materials that they would otherwise be investing a great deal in.

In terms of the specific projects — and this isn't me being political — I can't say what would work, and that's because the projects that are funded are often not an easy formula. They make the case, show evidence and tend to a need, but what they share is that they are often innovative and unexpected. I guess if they weren't, they wouldn't be applying for funding and they wouldn't be looking for collaborators across the sector to accomplish it. Sometimes the OLT has a specific imperative, and over the last few years that has been to respond to the recommendations from the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (Behrendt et al., 2012). This has resulted in some work and the appointment of some new fellows who will respond to this work. I would imagine that, in spite of request for specific response, these will be equally innovative.

Barney: Yes, hopefully there will be some new innovative work done by OLT fellowships and projects coming through that can be shared in future Network events. You mentioned in your online presentation at the Network

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Workshop in 2013 that educators in Indigenous Studies are often asked to explain and unpack 'Indigenous cultural competencies', and asked to support people in applying these ideas across the disciplines. Can you discuss this further and the possible role of the Network?

O'Sullivan: A really important role for any network, but I think this is especially true across Indigenous contexts, is to ensure that we don't just provide answers but that we support disciplines in understanding what can work *within* their discipline. This will make an impossible task a practical and useful exercise, and turn a requirement into a positive opportunity. I've been asked on many occasions to explain how Indigenous perspectives can be included in maths or science. Sometimes it's a question, sometimes it's a declarative in the form of a question. Either way, my problem is that these areas are far from my discipline of Art, and I can't specifically answer it. But I can point to resources and scholars who can. Particularly in international contexts. How wonderful, then, that the Network is all about these connections. We can, as a cohort of scholars who mostly work across the humanities and social sciences, link to our brothers and sisters who work within these disciplines.

Barney: You and I have discussed this before, but can you reflect on the role of non-Indigenous academics in Indigenous Studies? Could collaborative teaching between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics be a way forward?

O'Sullivan: It absolutely can, but not as a blunt instrument, which is how it has often been applied. The assumption that an Indigenous academic and a non-Indigenous academic will somehow represent all Indigenous and all non-Indigenous people represents an uneven relationship, where one is expert both *on* and *within*, and the other is somehow an interested and invested observer. I don't represent all Aboriginal people, and you, Kate, *do* have a cultural and ethnic identity, not just a non-identity. Non-Indigenous is not an ethnicity or an identity, it's a state of not being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and this negative space is something that students realise very early on if you set up this dyadic approach. The non-Indigenous person then becomes not a person at all, but representative of the system and the central epistemological and ontological space, which is immediately interrogated by the stronger students, and is eventually interrogated by all, particularly if they fall into the category of being non-Indigenous.

Although it has its detractors, I prefer to work with the idea that all people have culture and that no-one gets 'let off the hook' in what they bring to understanding Indigenous perspectives. When we work together — both Indigenous and academics from every other ethnicity — we are able to provide a richness to understanding Indigenous perspectives, and it instils in all of our students that they have a role and a responsibility to play in understanding these perspectives.

I've been an academic for more than 20 years, and in that time I have seen a change from being a curio who wasn't always read as Aboriginal, in part because I'm fair-skinned, through a time when there was deference to Indigenous academics, to a place now where we are all working on the project of understanding. That being said, and combined with the importance of us working collaboratively, I also feel very strongly that we must have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples teaching and researching in our universities, and hopefully across the disciplines. This is important for a few reasons, particularly because it creates a space where students know that we inhabit and belong in this place, and for Indigenous students, it shows them that they also belong. But it also does bring a perspective that represents our mob. I don't mean in some amorphous pan-Indigenising way, but rather we have the perspective of what it is to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and can contribute that, as individuals, to the project of education.

Barney: And perhaps there are ways for Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators to collaborate more strongly in the classroom and bring their perspectives, knowledge and relationships into their teaching. Another issue linked with teaching staff in Indigenous Studies is the high work load of Indigenous academic staff, which Susan Page and Christine Asmar (2008) have reported on. They point out that the high teaching load for Indigenous staff includes Indigenising curricula and supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous students undertaking Indigenous Studies, which tends 'to be unrecognised and unrewarded' (2008, p. 115). From your perspective, how do you think this issue of Indigenous staff work load can be addressed?

O'Sullivan: It's terrible, but what I said in the last answer contributes to the workload. As educators in the academy, we have so much work we have to do beyond our discipline work, our curriculum development and our recognised workload. Page and Asmar's work highlights the lack of understanding within the institutions. I've been fortunate, for the last 8 years, to be an academic at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education where we have a high level of Indigenous academic and professional staff. I wouldn't say that we get everything right, but it's amazing how much easier our workloads are when there are more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues to share the load. In some ways this really is a numbers game. But even at my institution, there are few Indigenous people in senior positions, so those of us who are, are frequently the only people within the Institute who can provide that support, understanding and input.

In the end, there are still so few of us in the academy, and very senior Indigenous academics are often mired in the administrivia and business of their institution. The way

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that this will change — and it was a recommendation out of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (Behrendt et al., 2012) — is for the institutions to recognise this contribution in workload and understand that our work, representation, engagement and expertise seeded across the institution makes the system more effective. It provides better outcomes for students, a more productive and engaged workforce, and offers a way to really enact these reconciliation programs that so many institutions are now engaging.

Barney: That's right, and as Page and Asmar argue, Indigenous staff can 'struggle to balance their desire to help all their students, against the need to prioritise other career-related work (particularly research); and against a desire to put Indigenous students first' (2008, p. 115). Finally, what could be the future directions/initiatives of the Network?

O'Sullivan: I'd like to see us continue to have an online place that we can maintain and support resource sharing. The Network is built to be used, to provide and encourage the submission of material that can be incorporated and examined in terms of curriculum design and student learning. Through the website (www.indigenousstudies.edu.au), the Network is producing, and linking to, resources that would be helpful to anyone who might be new to teaching across Indigenous perspectives, and for all of us who would like to see how our colleagues are approaching this important work.

Conclusion

Collaboration and conversations have been key in the Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network. It has provided a space for educators to build relationships, share their experiences in the classroom as well as the results of teaching and learning research projects, and explore key issues in Indigenous Studies. As O'Sullivan notes, exploring how to define 'Indigenous Studies' as a discipline and the links to other disciplines has been discussed and debated at length within the Network (see the introduction to this volume). The diverse perspectives from Network participants on this topic highlight the dynamic, diverse and difficult nature of the discipline. The website has been an important outcome of the Network and shares teaching and learning examples from scholars across Australia, as well as provide useful tools for educators to use in tertiary Indigenous Studies classrooms. We are continuing to add teaching and learning examples and encourage readers to share their own examples via the website (www.indigenousstudies.edu.au).

The Office for Learning and Teaching has been key in establishing and facilitating the Network and has supported the Network by provided funding for Network meetings, the website and the National Workshop. Certainly, as O'Sullivan outlines there is still important work for the Network to do, including: responding further to the recommendations of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (Behrendt et al., 2012); continuing to explore how to define 'Indigenous Studies'; and mapping of Indigenous Studies courses across universities. The politics of *who* teaches Indigenous Studies and 'the well-documented lack of Indigenous university staff' (Page & Asmar, 2008, p. 109) could also be explored further by the Network and has been the topic of a recent Network panel discussion (Barney, Bond, Page, & O'Sullivan, 2014). This panel explored questions that are key to the Network and to the discipline: What is the role of non-Indigenous people in the teaching of Indigenous Studies? How can culturally safe spaces be put in place for Indigenous academics? Can collaborative teaching between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators improve teaching practices? The Network represents in many ways a call from educators in the higher education sector to enter into a more progressive dialogue to bring about a discipline-based engagement with Indigenous Australian histories, cultures and experiences. Further events hosted by the Network, such as another workshop or conference, would provide forums to open up 'difficult dialogues' about teaching and learning Indigenous Studies (Nakata, 2004, pp. 2–3), build further relationships with leading national and international Indigenous Studies scholars, and continue to strengthen and grow the Network.

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