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Challenging Lecturer Assumptions About Preservice Teacher Learning in Mandatory Indigenous Studies

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This paper explores and challenges our assumptions as lecturers about preservice teachers' knowledge and beliefs entering a mandatory Indigenous Studies subject. A total of 38 focus groups were conducted over two years (2011–2012) with preservice teachers enrolled in teaching degrees at the University of Sydney. Findings were analysed to identify and critically reflect on our assumptions about preservice teachers' prior understanding of the content and approaches to learning. To challenge our assumptions, this paper applies Brookfield's (1995) student and autobiographical lenses to engage in critical reflection and Nakata's (2002, 2007) 'cultural interface' to better understand the complexities, tensions and transformations that occur for learners in the Indigenous Studies classroom. Findings illuminated that assumptions about the level of resistance and indifference to course content were often overstated and rather, many preservice teachers were more likely to be insecure and reticent to express their ideas in this complex and potentially uncomfortable learning environment. Implications from the study highlight the need for ongoing critical reflection of lecturer assumptions about preservice teachers' dispositions and how they engage with the subject to better understand the diversity of their knowledge and experiences and what this means for teaching and learning in this context.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous studies, Indigenous education, preservice teachers, scholarship of teaching and learning

As mandatory Indigenous Studies subjects in preservice teacher education grow across the Australian higher education sector, a number of teaching and learning approaches have emerged in order to ensure that Indigenous knowledges, experiences, pedagogies and perspectives are central to preservice teacher learning. A significant body of research (Aveling, 2006; Hollinsworth, 2016; McLaughlin, 2013; O'Dowd, 2010; Phillips, 2011; Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin & Sharma-Brymer, 2012) identifies Indigenous Studies as a complex, challenging and oftentimes uncomfortable learning experience for a number of preservice teachers who enter with a naive, prejudiced, hostile and/or an antipathetic outlook to the field.

Indigenous Studies is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field that has the potential to shift non-Indigenous students' stereotypes, overcome biases, misrepresentations and historical omissions (Nakata, Nakata, Keech & Bolt, 2014, p. 10) about Indigenous Australia. Nakata et al. (2014) also position Indigenous Studies as having the potential to support student critical engagement with 'descriptions, interpretations, conceptualisations, representations of Indigenous people's knowledge, cultures and experiences' (p. 10).

The mandatory Indigenous Studies subjects referred to in this research also aim to develop preservice teacher knowledge of the 'pedagogical approaches, curriculum developments and assessment issues around the learning needs of Indigenous students and how to teach non-Indigenous students about Indigenous society' (Ma Rhea & Russell, 2012, p. 20). Ma Rhea and Russell (2012) argue that developing preservice teacher knowledge about these pedagogical approaches should be considered a distinct cognate area — Indigenous education as a method. Their

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paper highlights the need for further investigation into the pedagogical, curricular and assessment decision-making processes of these cognate areas as Universities seek to develop graduate skills and knowledge across a range of professional domains (p. 20). Page (2014) has also noted that research has largely focused on what should be taught in Indigenous Studies rather than on how students learn in this area. These arguments prompt us to engage in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Indigenous Studies, a process that focuses on improving student learning by:

> (a) being informed about teaching and learning generally and in the teachers' own discipline; (b) reflection on that information, the teachers' particular context and the relations between the two; (c) the focus of the teaching approach adopted; and (d) communication of the relevant aspects of the other three dimensions to members of the community of scholars (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000, p. 167).

It is within this context that the researchers who are also lecturers in primary and secondary mandatory Indigenous education units for preservice teachers at the University of Sydney employ two of Brookfield's (1995) four reflective lenses, the student and the autobiographical lenses. We do this to better understand the complex teaching and learning space we inhabit in the fusion of the two cognate areas of Indigenous Studies and Indigenous education. We use these lenses to analyse our assumptions about the mostly non-Aboriginal student cohort enrolled in the mandatory Indigenous education units, including assumptions about their prior knowledge, experiences and sociopolitical understandings of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and communities. We were particularly interested in reflecting on how we as lecturers approach the pedagogical aspects of what we do and what assumptions about preservice teachers and their learning underpin our decision-making.

Context

An Indigenous Studies subject has been mandatory in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course at the University for over 20 years, making it one of the longest running subjects of its kind in Australia (Mooney & Craven, 2005). In 2009, a mandatory subject was introduced into the Bachelor of Education (Secondary: Human Movement and Health Education) and in 2010, it was introduced into the Bachelor of Education (Secondary: Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science) Combined Degrees. The introduction of these new subjects occurred as a response to external professional accreditation requirements for teacher education courses and preservice teachers through the New South Wales Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) accreditation process. This accreditation process specifies that it is essential that all preservice teachers are able to, 'Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages' to promote reconciliation and understand the impact of cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014). Through active engagement in this subject, outcomes include developing preservice teachers' knowledge and skills so that they will feel confident in implementing culturally responsive pedagogical approaches in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Indigenous perspectives in their curriculum areas.

The mandatory Indigenous education subjects at the University of Sydney are constructed in order to balance the theoretical knowledge needs of preservice teachers with their desire for practical skills and resources that will assist them in the classroom (Thorpe & Burgess, 2012). The subject is organised into three themes and taught sequentially as follows:

> Weeks 1–5: Identity, sociocultural and historical contexts including racism
> Weeks 6–9: Contemporary pedagogy and curriculum perspectives and their practical applications
> Weeks 10–12: Future directions in Indigenous education

Multiple Indigenous perspectives are highlighted through a critical approach to the themes illuminating the complexity of the Indigenous Australian sociopolitical, cultural, educational and historical landscape. Subject content is presented through a positive, proactive lens and critically discussed in a conscious attempt to inspire preservice teachers to develop an interest in Aboriginal education that will continue when they become teachers. This critical pedagogical approach encourages preservice teachers to explore notions such as knowledge production and intersubjective understandings of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships.

Following is an outline of the theoretical positioning of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2002; 2007) that contextualises the teaching and learning space within which we operate, and Brookfield's (1995) student and autobiographical lenses that we apply to critically reflect on our assumptions.

The Cultural Interface

The cultural interface is a real and symbolic space (Buckskin, 2012, p. 63) wherein Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, cultures, values and beliefs intersect (Nakata, 2007). It is a space wherein multiple understandings and perspectives can be articulated in a collaborative project to open up cross-cultural dialogue and create new and transformative discourses in Aboriginal education (Yunkaporta, 2009). Yunkaporta (2009) suggests that when Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews are positioned as opposite, conflict and tension can occur leading to a superficial rendering of everyone's

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experiences. The cultural interface as a reconciling framework enables us to unpack these tensions and ambiguities and through critical reflection respond more empathetically to preservice teachers' feedback on their learning. McGloin (2009) offers a useful summary of the cultural interface:

- 'it is a contested knowledge space;
- it includes the continuities and discontinuities of Indigenous agency; and
- it identifies a continual tension that informs and limits what can/cannot be said in the everyday' (p. 40).

In this study, the cultural interface describes the space in which mainly non-Indigenous preservice teachers focus on Indigenous knowledges, cultures and issues as they pertain to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and implementing Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. As a mandatory subject, it brings with it additional tensions and possibilities due to this imposed status. It is a space wherein lecturers actively attempt to provide a culturally responsive and supportive environment for all preservice teachers so they can ask questions and express views even if they are unsure of these. It is through this approach that lecturers hope to expose and explore multiple perspectives and identify potential tensions and transformations in this knowledge space.

The cultural interface provides a theoretical lens through which we can identify and analyse key elements of our practice as we tap into our own autobiographies to engage in self-reflection. It also allows for us to reflect on the range of positions preservice teachers may have such as '... non-critical engagements that result in students' romantic embrace, their polite patronisation, their respectful silence, or their more dismissive responses to these efforts' (Nakata et al., 2014, p. 14).

We apply Nakata's (2012) theoretical framing of the cultural interface and its three key principles (*locale, agency and tension*) to interrogate some of our own assumptions in a continued effort to develop challenging yet inclusive pedagogical approaches and curriculum renewal for diverse student cohorts. These three principles include the *locale* of the learner — where preservice teachers are currently at in their learning journey; the *agency* of the learner and their levels of confidence to actively engage in the subject, and the *tension* that occurs for preservice teachers when Western knowledges are challenged by Indigenous perspectives (Hart, et al., 2012, p. 710).

Brookfield's Lenses

Brookfield (1995) applies four lenses for critical reflection to 'hunt assumptions' — the autobiographical, student, peer and theoretical (pp. 2–7). In this paper, we focus on the student and autobiographical lenses to reflect on our assumptions about preservice teacher knowledge and beliefs. Nakata et al. (2014, p. 9) suggests that teaching and learning frameworks tend to embed assumptions into pedagogical practices that remain largely invisible and unchallenged, potentially limiting student and scholarly outcomes. This then:

> ... brings into play particular assumptions about students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and their dispositions to learn about Indigenous people and issues, about what they need to know, and about how to best enable them to acquire specific knowledge and skills to develop effective practice for Indigenous people and issues in professional contexts' (Nakata et al., 2014, p. 9).

Critical reflection of these assumptions emerged as a key priority in our ongoing collegial discussions toward subject renewal including subject, aims, outcomes and the learning environment. Brookfield (1995) has identified three types of assumptions that teachers make — *causal, prescriptive* and *paradigmatic*.

Causal assumptions are described by Brookfield (1995) as the easiest to uncover and are stated in predictive terms of identifying consequences from actions. He suggests that initial reflection can easily uncover the causal assumptions, however, if interrogated more deeply, will uncover embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions (p. 2–3). The current thematic and chronological sequencing of the subject content is an example of a causal assumption that could reflect an out-dated preference for a linear framework. Assumptions have been made that this content sequence encourages student engagement through scaffolding of key concepts and historical moments.

Prescriptive assumptions describe what we think ought to happen in a situation, how teachers should behave, what good educational processes look like and obligations that students and teachers have to each other (Brookfield, 1995, p. 3). For instance, does our attempt to create culturally responsive learning environments provide opportunities for students to actively engage in dialogue, challenge and be challenged and does this inspire them to model this approach in their own teaching?

Finally, Brookfield (1995, p. 2) describes *paradigmatic* assumptions as the most difficult to articulate and reveal, prompting us to reflect on the 'common-sense categories' we construct about our learners. For instance, labels such as 'racist', 'hostile', 'resentful' and 'ambivalent' emerge in informal conversations between lecturers as a result of classroom experience. Although these labels may resonate, do they inadvertently impact on the way we engage with the students and present the subject?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in 2011 and 2012 from 38 focus groups of approximately 15–20 volunteer preservice teachers in each group. Colleagues not involved in teaching this subject conducted the focus groups at the end of each semester. As per university ethics procedures, preservice teachers were advised that while they would

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be de-identified, they did not have to participate and had the option to leave the room. Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed with the support of NVivo software to extrapolate emerging themes and issues.

The large number of preservice teacher focus groups provided a rich data source that accounted for a wide range of responses reflecting Nakata's (2007) conceptualisation of the complex, contradictory and contested teaching and learning space of the 'cultural interface'.

What are the Assumptions We Bring to Our Teaching?

The autobiographical lens is the basis for self-reflection to 'become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings that frame how we work' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 29–30). The student lens (Brookfield, 1995) also provides opportunities to critically reflect on our assumptions about the knowledge and beliefs preservice teachers bring, engage with and develop through Indigenous Studies subjects. Although we found some of our causal, prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions aligned with the focus group data, we also found that the data challenged us to reconsider some of our 'frames of reference' which Mezirow (2000) argues often operate outside consciousness. These frames of reference are so powerful that they direct and shape specific interpretations and influence how we make judgment of others and understand cause and effect. Of particular interest were the student responses that challenged us to interrogate whether some of their negative reactions were drawn from feelings of vulnerability rather than positions of resistance.

Causal Assumptions

In the early weeks of the subject, issues of identity, culture, belonging and racism foreground the presentation of historical knowledge presented from an Indigenous standpoint. This structure is similar to that presented in the prototype unit 'Respect, Relationship and Reconciliation' developed for AITSL to address the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Focus Areas within the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (see http://rrr.edu.au). The sequencing of the thematic framework is predicated on the assumption that many students hold a range of stereotypical ideas about Indigenous Australians and have knowledge gaps regarding the historical relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Consequently, this knowledge should be taught at the beginning of the course. Although our assumptions are supported by the research literature (for example, Maynard, 2007; Phillips, 2011), we sought to consider how these assumptions play out at the cultural interface for students who have a sound understanding of these historical perspectives.

In analysing these assumptions through Nakata's (2007) principle of the locale of the learner, the data indicated that a number of students perceive that they have a solid foundation in this area from their schooling. These students articulated their appreciation of the significance of Indigenous education as a mandatory focus in the degree and hoped to move beyond content they believe was not targeted highly enough:

> I can't speak for everyone but I learnt it at school, it was a big part of religion, history, society and culture for me when I was at high school so I'm not saying that I knew everything but I did have access to a lot of the content that we covered and I just felt with the repetition for me and because I had had it repeated at me, last year and at uni and in high school, kind of lost relevance a little bit 'cause I wanted to see how this could actually apply to me when I teach.

Some students felt disengaged because the content and assessment were not challenging enough . . . 'the essay.. it's a bit vanilla . . . it's a bit kind of regurgitate what you know'. An area of enquiry that has arisen from students who expressed similar frustrations is whether, in our desire to ensure that all students have a foundational understanding of the content, we inadvertently disengage some of the enthusiastic and well-informed students who want to be challenged more deeply.

During the first round of focus group data in 2011 many preservice teachers indicated they had a good grasp of the historical context and recommended that we should start the subject with the curriculum and pedagogical perspectives so as to inspire the 'teacher within'. Interestingly, after modifying the subject accordingly, the 2012 focus group data indicated that students felt it important to learn about the cultural and historical content to contextualise their understanding of the curriculum perspectives that followed. These seemingly contradictory responses offered through the student lens could be viewed as a time waster given we adapted the subject in response to the feedback. However, as Brookfield (1995) notes, 'Knowing something of how students experience learning helps us build convincing connections between what we want them to do and their own concerns and expectations. We make a stronger case for students to take seriously what we say' (p. 93). Therefore, we view this as constructive feedback that helps us interpret and respond to student expectations and learning needs with greater confidence.

As well as reflecting on the content, we wanted to explore our assumptions about the type of learning environment we aspire to create. Lecturers attempt to provide strength-based perspectives and recount success stories about working collaboratively with Aboriginal students and communities in the hope that we motivate students to prioritise Aboriginal education in their work and future professional development. We have assumed that this disposition will manifest as a genuine student experience; however, as Brookfield (1995) warns, 'Teaching innocently means assuming that the meanings and significance we place on our actions are the ones that students take from them' (p. 1). Indeed, our data showed that some

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preservice teachers believed some staff inadvertently reinforced a deficit view of Aboriginal education:

> I found in a few of the lectures they were really, really negative, I sat there and I left it and I thought I'm going to absolutely fail if I have Indigenous students in my class because there's no hope, and I think that in this kind of subject we ... the lecturers need to be realistic but very positive so you can go here's the state of education it's really woeful and we're really struggling and it's such a complex thing but here's what you can do, here's some points, grab onto these things and we can all go okay, cool, I can do that but it was kind of like here's education it's really crap, here it's kind of oh, big.

The student lens has been quite powerful in challenging us to reflect on the possible mismatch between our perception that we are effective in offering a strength-based perspective alongside developing preservice teacher knowledge regarding the complex historical, social and cultural issues impacting on disadvantaged school communities (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012) where many preservice teachers may find themselves teaching.

Some students also reported a sense of being restricted and that their agency was undermined especially when they had difficulty articulating their position. One student noted:

> I felt like even in assessment we were really pressured into looking at Indigenous issues in a specific way and I found that really personally quite difficult because I think it's really important as students to be able to ... not like stepping on eggshells ... understand critically, so I felt as though the assessments didn't really allow us to grow our knowledge ... that's the only way that we can actually change ideas and stereotypes ... and I think that's still the issue today.

This student indicates a desire to learn in his/her own time and space as well as have the opportunity to demonstrate this through assessment. This perspective raises the issue of what type of assessment best reflects student learning in a subject wherein some of the most important lessons are personal and emotional (Mackinlay & Barney, 2010).

Prescriptive Assumptions

Prescriptive assumptions are, as Brookfield argues (1995, p. 3), those that articulate what 'good educational processes looks like'. Here, we are challenged to reflect on the conditions that create mutual respect between teacher and student that enables student agency at the cultural interface. To achieve this, we make explicit efforts early in the subject to identify and talk about how we might navigate the difficult and uncomfortable dialogue (Nakata, 2004) that might occur. In order to provide a constructive foundation and encourage within preservice teachers a sense of their own agency, we apply a dialogic approach to actively encourage engagement with the topic. For instance, in one activity students' anonymously write down questions about any issue or concern they have regardless of the complexity or sensitivity of the comment. These questions are kept in an envelope and then randomly drawn upon throughout the semester for discussion. This anonymity alleviates the fear of being perceived as racist or ignorant and was appreciated by many students as follows:

> ... because it was anonymous we didn't know who asked that question, you were more comfortable with the fact that you don't mind answering it and throughout the whole semester we have had a good environment in the classroom so we have been able to discuss some complex issues.

This approach recognises learner vulnerability emanating from their locale as well as the tension that can be generated when discussing difficult or challenging perspectives at the cultural interface. Furthermore, another student recognised the importance of '... constructing a standard of being culturally sensitive ... that there are certain ways to say things and ... there are certain ways that maybe aren't so useful or not so culturally sensitive' and that this could possibly constrain or corrupt the dialogue. Here, the cultural interface is in action as students grapple with the tension of finding the most appropriate way to deal with uncomfortable dialogue. This tension also impacts on the 'emotional labour' (Asmar & Page, 2009; Harlow, 2003) required of lecturers as they seek to engage insecure and reticent learners in ways that encourages agency to speak with integrity. In many cases, this process was a success for preservice teachers (and lecturers) who grappled with this phenomenon. Examining our assumptions provided deeper understandings about how we nurture 'the affective, existential quality of moral engagement and commitment' of preservice teachers instead of focusing on 'crucial and essential' theoretical analysis (Beyer, 1991, p. 127) in the field.

Another perspective that emerged from the data was the dilemma expressed about wanting to speak openly yet feeling the need for caution so as not to be thought of as ignorant or offensive. This created tension, as one student noted:

> We couldn't really speak our mind without feeling that we were going to say something ... unpolitically correct and I think in a subject like this we have to be able to approach the unpolitically correct because that's the only way that we can actually change ideas and stereotypes.

We could view this student's response in a negative light and describe him/her as a latent racist ('I'm not a racist but ...') given that he/she had hoped to express potentially offensive opinions yet was presumably held back because he/she risked a hostile retort from peers or the lecturer. However, critical reflection challenges us to focus our attention on the constructive aspects of the comment — *that's the only way that we can actually change ideas and stereotypes*. This leads us to consider alternatives for engaging students in respectful, risk taking dialogue without public scorn, and yet safe for those who might take offense. Brookfield (1995) argues:

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> When it comes to the pedagogic problem most frequently cited by college teachers —dealing with disinterested or hostile students — knowing something about how they're experiencing learning is essential. If we have a grasp of the sources of apathy or anger in students, we can work on developing exercises and activities that are as nonthreatening and connecting as possible (1995, p. 93).

Applying a range of strategies such as an adaptation of Brookfield's 'Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire' (1995, p. 114), in which students respond to questions about their engagement, uncertainty and reactions to the learning activities, acknowledges the learner's locale, and that personal space and reflection are needed in order to access agency. Indeed, Ahlquist (1991) in writing about her attempt to challenge negative beliefs of 'Others' held by secondary teachers in her unit 'Multicultural Foundations of Education' was disappointed in the outcome at the end of the semester, conceding that she may have expected too many changes in her students' thinking in too brief a period. She notes, 'Now I realise that deep understanding of an issue grows out of reflective examination of one's own experience, and true consciousness often comes very slowly' (p. 167).

Paradigmatic Assumptions

The autobiographical lens provides a powerful means to challenge our paradigmatic assumptions. Brookfield (1995) argues that examining our paradigmatic assumptions requires us to delve into the instinctive, tacit ways of thinking about our students and how this impacts on our teaching (p. 2–3). They are often the most difficult to define because they guide our modus operandi. Our experiences of teaching Indigenous Studies over many years has led us to make a number of paradigmatic assumptions about the way students deal with the challenging content in the subject. For example, we have experienced students as being:

- Resistant
- Passive aggressive
- Naïvely surprised
- Pre-emptively defensive
- Emotionally shocked
- Ambivalent and / or indifferent
- Idealistic
- Passionate (sometimes with 'missionary zeal')
- Interested and enthusiastic
- Empathetic

Although this list acknowledges our perceptions that preservice teachers enter the learning environment with diverse dispositions, our reflections on these categorisations highlighted that oftentimes we tend to focus our teaching and learning approach on those we anticipate will be resistant. This may create a sense of apprehension for lecturers especially when attention is paid on pre-empting ambivalence, indifference and hostility rather than interest and enthusiasm. Again, the significant emotional labour required here is embedded in the social and cultural domains of lecturer's biographical and teaching experiences (Zembylas, 2005, p.110). This may overdetermine pedagogical approaches through assuming that ambivalence and hostility are wide spread and this may therefore contribute to tension at the cultural interface.

A consequence of being overly focused on resistant students is that our energy can be inadvertently directed toward teaching defensively. This prompts us to consider the locale of motivated students and whether we unintentionally disengage them and undermine their enthusiasm and agency in responding proactively to the subject. Critical reflection also urges us to reconsider our teaching strategies for the self-doubting learner who may well enact protective behaviours to conceal their vulnerabilities and insecurities. These protective behaviours may present as antipathetic or resistant when in fact they may not be. Indifference to the learning may not be specifically targeted at Indigenous Studies, for antipathy and resistance to learning can occur in any classroom and as Brookfield (2006) notes — resistance is a complex phenomenon (p. 225). It is also important to acknowledge the power differential that occurs between any teacher and student where the student can be understandably hesitant about voicing their opinions and uncertainties '... to people who exercise substantial influence [through the awarding of grades] over their career destinies and their self-concepts' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 118).

Furthermore, often those preservice teachers who are initially negative towards the subject experience some level of cognitive dissonance throughout the semester. McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) explain that 'According to cognitive dissonance theory, an individual can experience psychological tension or dissonance when new knowledge is incongruent with previously acquired knowledge' (p. 165). For some preservice teachers, Indigenous Studies exposes them to knowledge inconsistent with their prior beliefs and experiences and dissonance are expressed outwardly as a form of resistance (p. 165).

Research (see for instance Aveling, 2006; Phillips, 2011) suggests that cognitive dissonance is an important pedagogical tool in Indigenous Studies as lecturers are able to shift preservice teacher attitudes by 'situating resistance as a means to facilitate in-depth engagement with the issues' (Phillips, 2011, p. 261). However, Faulkner and Crowhurst (2014) suggest that, 'Preservice teachers do not generally come to university to experience a form of cognitive dissonance' (p. 400). Consequently, this may not always be the most effective way to shift preservice teachers' attitudes, positioning or their impetus to model this approach in their teaching. Faulkner and Crowhurst (2014) further

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note that though cognitive dissonance can create new knowledge through learner discomfort, there is a risk of pushing the learner too far out of their comfort zone so that this '... reinforces, rather than shifts, pre-existing attitudes' (p. 398). Here, cognitive dissonance becomes counterproductive as the resistance it tends to generate can inadvertently defeat the very purpose of Indigenous Studies (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001, p. 165). The following student intimates this when s/he says:

> ... I found the whole tone of the course really condescending, I will admit to being pretty ignorant to Aboriginal culture and that's why I thought alright cool, we'll learn about it and I feel like I came in and they said you're a racist and everything you're going to do is wrong and I thought oh, shit!

In order to subvert students' negative responses, we find that a shared history approach provides the space for inclusion of multiple perspectives. Encouraging students to critically analyse colonial relationships and their impact on the current context in Aboriginal education shifts the learning from blame, guilt and binary interpretations to proactive engagement to contribute to positive change. One student articulates the impact of this approach on her learning:

> I thought the shared history was probably the most powerful part of the course to be honest ... like my perception before was kind of like Aboriginal education was a lost cause ... and when I came in my opinion was changed, like completely, because of the readings and the information provided.

The data highlighted that this inclusive 'common-ground' approach was effective for a number of preservice teachers because it gave them agency to participate in dialogue about Aboriginal education.

Implications

One of the key implications emerging from this study is the need for lecturers to critically reflect upon and challenge our assumptions about the knowledge and beliefs preservice teachers bring to mandatory Indigenous Studies. Application of the cultural interface framework in this context enables us to better understand the complexities, tensions and transformations that occur for learners in the Indigenous Studies classroom. Yunkaporta's (2009) interpretation of the cultural interface as a reconciling space resonates, however, consideration of the locale and agency of the learner and how tensions are experienced by individuals (Nakata, 2007), further illuminates possibilities for addressing these complexities.

Another implication from this research is that the students lens is useful in analysing why preservice teachers may choose to '... resist, oppose, defend, convert, patronise, tolerate, or thoughtfully engage the content of their courses to the best of their ability' (Nakata, Nakata, Keech & Bolt, 2012, p. 136). This provides opportunities to assess their responses and work towards student-centred, flexible and innovative curriculum and pedagogy. Furthermore, Brookfield's (1995) autobiographical lens offers a personal critical insight to our unconscious biases and how these may impact on the teaching and learning approaches favoured in the classroom. By applying both of these lenses, lecturers can identify and challenge assumptions about their students and the appropriateness of the content and pedagogical approaches applied. Exploration of Brookfield's other critical reflection lenses, the theoretical and peer, would build a more comprehensive picture of this space as these intersect and impact on each other. The implication here is that creating the space and opportunity for lecturers to reflect on all aspects of the subject as well as the learning environment is valuable in generating innovative, empowered and improved pedagogical practices.

Consequently, when designing curriculum for preservice teachers, we need to consider how we identify student prior knowledge and interests and seek to incorporate this into curriculum and pedagogy. We are alert to the danger of becoming too focused on what Brookfield (2006) calls a 'conversional obsession' which 'happens when you become obsessed with converting a small and easily identifiable minority or hard-core resistant students into becoming enthusiastic advocates for learning' (p. 213). This may disengage the preservice teachers who come to our subject with high expectations and commitment to making a difference in Aboriginal education. The key task is to find the balance between challenging 'hard-core' resisters while not letting this monopolise our efforts given the diversity of students. As Hollinsworth (2016) notes 'Sometimes the intense challenges of teaching antiracism courses and addressing student resistance can occupy all our thoughts and energies, but the ultimate aim is to enable our students to take their learnings and responsibilities beyond campus' (p. 427).

Understanding preservice teachers background and experiences including prior knowledge, dispositions and aspirations is important aspects of the locale of the learner. How to harness these includes consideration of the cognitive and emotional resilience preservice teachers possess to openly engage with the often controversial and challenging content. Although lecturers attempt to address this through the creation of culturally inclusive learning spaces, the short amount of time spent with students (between 24 and 36 hours in one semester) makes this a challenging task. Those preservice teachers who reported positive experiences and even transformative moments in the subject often commented on the atmosphere that allowed this to happen. Clearly, this is an ongoing project and so exploring the nuances of how culturally and linguistically diverse students interact and engage with the Indigenous Studies classroom will necessarily contribute to curriculum and pedagogical modifications to the subject.

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Finding the balance between presenting a strength-based positive approach to Aboriginal education and preparing preservice teachers for the potential difficulties they may face if they teach in a disadvantaged school is an important consideration in this study. This can be aggravated by the dilemma of having to present at times, generalisations about Aboriginal people to make a particular point, while simultaneously making students aware of the importance of recognising the individual. This also extends to the notion of difference and the danger of 'Othering', and thus it is important for lecturers to be cognisant and proactive in acknowledging and deconstructing this, as well as challenging preservice teachers to do the same.

As with many higher education subjects, appropriate and rich assessment tasks that truly 'measure' student learning and achievement is a challenge particularly in terms of those students who shift their deficit beliefs or want to engage in deeper, more nuanced understandings in relation to Indigenous Australians. What we hope above all other things is that we inspire our students to become advocates for Aboriginal education and motivate them to make a difference for Aboriginal students.

Conclusion

The focus group data highlight the emotional and intellectual complexity of a mandatory Indigenous Studies subject wherein potentially uncomfortable and unfamiliar learning is prevalent. Brookfield's (1995) approach to critical reflection and Nakata's (2002) cultural interface help us to challenge our assumptions about preservice teachers' knowledge and beliefs through better understanding the context within which we are working.

Brookfield's student lens provides a useful tool to critically analyse and reflect upon whether lecturers' pedagogical approaches contribute to or inhibit preservice teacher learning. It highlights the need to explore beyond causative assumptions to the prescriptive and paradigmatic as these reveal a more accurate account of what is happening in the subject for preservice teachers. This then prompts us to consider ways in which we can adapt our curriculum and pedagogy to better meet the cognitive, emotional and cultural needs of a diverse student body. As Faulkner and Crowhurst, (2014, p. 400) suggest, 'We acknowledge the need to continue to question our own roles as educators as rigorously as we demand of our preservice teachers as learners'.

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