

Essay: Topic Two

Assignment Four

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Over the past two decades there has been much debate surrounding Indigenous Studies and the need for Indigenous content to be included across all disciplines within Australian universities. The Indigenous Cultural Competence movement has come about following some discussion on the concept of university students graduating with the attribute of being 'culturally competent'. To achieve this, tertiary students need to have extensive access to new forms of learning materials that reflect the cultures of the various people that they might encounter in their professional lives. The cultures of Indigenous peoples are not widely studied or known by non-Indigenous undergraduates. Cultural competence goes beyond conducting a few workshops and assessing whether the students can regurgitate the content in a respectful manner. It is a way of incorporating Indigenous content and epistemologies into university disciplines and consequently 'Indigenising the curriculum'. In this essay I will discuss the concept of 'Indigenising the curriculum' through the cultural competence¹ model that incorporates knowledge, values and skills. I will conclude by explaining why primary school teachers, specifically, should employ a 'culturally competent' approach to their professional lives.

Indigenising the curriculum allows all tertiary students to access "some degree of Aboriginal Studies within their undergraduate ... programs" (Collard, Walker & Dudgeon. 1998, 7) as well as in postgraduate degrees should they choose to further their education. Martin Nakata has been somewhat of a forerunner for the concept of Indigenising the curriculum, often encouraging conversations about the issue. Nakata speaks about Indigenisation as "making a space within

¹ Although this essay focuses on cultural competence in relation to Indigenous Australians please note that the concept implies being competent in all of the cultures that one may come in contact with in their lives, professional or otherwise.

universities that is recognisably Indigenous – a space formed by inserting and asserting content, practices and processes that culturally affirm Indigenous people, students, community and perspectives” (2004, 9). Nakata focuses on the involvement of Indigenous people in this process despite the vast majority of the academics and students who are interested in Indigenous Studies and Indigenising the curriculum being non-Indigenous. It has been suggested that non-Indigenous people are sometimes drawn towards situations where Indigenous people are the dictators possibly as a means of compensating for the colonial past (Carey 2008, 8). It is the space between Indigenous control and western dominance that allows for negotiation and conversations about the place of Indigenous content and epistemologies within Australian university units and/or degrees. By exploring this space and forming relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within it, the ‘solution’ for Indigenising the curriculum will develop.

One popular model for Indigenising the curriculum is the idea of every tertiary student becoming ‘culturally competent’. The concept of being culturally competent extends beyond being knowledgeable and aware; or being culturally aware. Instead it incorporates knowledge, the assessment of personal values and professional bias, and the development of skills that are often learnt through experience (Ranzijn, McConnochie & Nolan 2009, 5). Williamson and Dalal (2007, 53) suggest that university graduates be able to “deconstruct... their own cultural situatedness ... [and use this to] recognise and practice appropriate professional skills with respect to their engagement with Indigenous peoples”. People who are able to successfully achieve this are likely to be regarded as culturally competent as they are able to combine their knowledge and values to build skills, though they should also acknowledge that being culturally competent is a process that can never be completed.

Cultural competence differs from other models or methods of Indigenising the curriculum, and although it is not a perfect concept, it allows for individuals to build upon multiple attributes, which can be organised into a matrix of levels. Grower, Nakata and Mackean (2007, 3) explain that it is not a 'cultural safety' approach, that focuses on protecting the cultures of Indigenous peoples nor does it reflect a 'cultural security' model, in that cultural competence is achieved by the individual through a variety of experiences and personal reflection rather than via a "systematic approach" (Grower, Nakata & Mackean 2007, 3). Although good in theory the concept of cultural competence is not without its faults. Grower, Nakata and Mackean (2007, 55) highlight the involvement and enthusiasm of staff members as a crucial factor in the success of cultural competency. If the staff members of universities are not willing to incorporate Indigenous content and epistemologies into the curriculum or they simply "remain... uncertain about the requirements" (Williamson & Dalal 2007, 56) and specifications of becoming culturally competent then this model is not the most appropriate choice and further discussion needs to occur to formulate new a better method of Indigenising the curriculum. Cultural competence is one particular solution to the issue of Indigenising the university curriculum to make each discipline a cross-cultural experience and learning environment.

As a future primary school teacher I acknowledge the importance of becoming culturally competent. Primary school teachers can be the first non-Indigenous adults that Indigenous children meet and spend time with on a regular basis. Between the hours of nine and three Indigenous children are in the care of their teachers, who are more often than not, non-Indigenous. It is vital that Indigenous children feel safe and comfortable within the classroom dynamic as their first impression can influence their feelings and attitudes towards non-Indigenous people, education and the world in general. Ranzijn, McConnochie and Nolan highlight the importance of "critically examining the nature of one's profession or occupation" (2009, 8) while Magga (2005, 319) exclaims that it is

concerning when “teachers don’t know anything about ... [Indigenous] culture[s]”. Combining these two ideas and the generally accepted statistics that depict the attendance and pass rate of Indigenous students as relatively low, it is evident that all teachers need to work towards being cultural competent in order to relate to the various student within their classroom. Magga also suggests that “Indigenous peoples ... come to ... [non-Indigenous peoples] with ... answers and ... [they only ask for] assistance in ensuring that these solutions are systematically and fully implemented” (2005, 319) implying that the education system needs to communicate with Indigenous peoples to ensure the best support system is in place. Many Indigenous communities are aware of the issues surrounding the primary education of their children and if they are able to work with open minded, culturally competent, respectful teachers then the future for Indigenous students is almost certainly brighter. Hopefully improving the primary education experience of Indigenous children will have a snowball effect that positively impacts all components of their lives. Imbedding the roots is the first step in achieving any large goal, if primary school teachers are able to provide a more encouraging learning environment for Indigenous children, because they are regarded as being culturally competent then as the children grow older they might experience a different world to that of their parents.

Indigenising Australian university curricula involves the inclusion of Indigenous content, learning materials and epistemologies. The Indigenous Cultural Competence movement was posed as a solution to including cross-cultural content across all discipline areas within the university. Cultural competence is a concept that encourages individuals to gather knowledge, assess their personal values and those of their profession and acquire skills that will assist them in their interactions with Indigenous peoples within their professional lives. I agree that with Carey that “cultural competence is an effective tool for Indigenising the curriculum ... [though it] does not automatically produce [the desired] outcomes” (2008, 4). By imbedding cultural competency into the list of university attributes, newly qualified primary school teachers can apply their knowledge, values and skills to their

workplace in order to improve the learning experience for Indigenous children, which in turn can produce more Indigenous academics to continue the valuable conversations about Indigenising the curriculum. For Australian tertiary students to be skillful when interacting with Indigenous peoples within their professional lives they need to be adequately equipped with a critical understanding of Indigenous cultures, and for this to happen they must have access to a vast range of learning materials.

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