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Decolonising the Curriculum: Who is in the Room?

Howard Sercombe , Carly Stanley, Keenan Mundine,
and Helen Wolfenden 

Introduction

One of the most disturbing realities of modern criminal justice in Australia is the staggering rate of incarceration of Aboriginal people (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research, 2020). Aboriginal and

H. Sercombe (✉)

UNSW University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia
e-mail: h.sercombe@unsw.edu.au

C. Stanley · K. Mundine

Deadly Connections Community and Justice Services, Marrickville, NSW,
Australia

e-mail: carly@deadlyconnections.org.au

K. Mundine

e-mail: keenan@deadlyconnections.org.au

H. Wolfenden

Macquarie University, Macquarie, NSW, Australia

e-mail: helen.wolfenden@mq.edu.au

Torres Strait Islander people reportedly suffer under the highest rate of imprisonment in the world, with 2039 Indigenous people currently imprisoned per 100,000, compared to 163 per 100,000 in the non-Indigenous population (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018). By comparison, Gramlich (2020) records that the comparable US rate for African American people in 2018 was 1501. The Aboriginal experience is not limited to imprisonment. For many Aboriginal families, the arm of the law reaches preferentially into their households almost on a daily basis, in practices of stop and search, predictive policing, police raids, traffic stops and routine apprehension and questioning.

This chapter is based on an extended conversation between us three and radio/podcast academic Helen Wolfenden, employing knowledge-generation processes integral to Aboriginal knowledge systems, or what Aboriginal people call ‘yarning’ (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Cunneen, 2018; Leeson et al., 2016; Shay, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2019). It is an attempt to include you in the story of our experience, an invitation for you to yarn with us about what happened in *CRIM2031 Indigenous Perspectives in Criminology*, and what could happen a lot more often in other places and with other subjects. To be consistent with Aboriginal knowledge systems, it really should be two-way, a journey we go on together, and for you to share your experience and struggles, and for us to sense what knowledge you are ready for and what will be useful to you. We will have to imagine that, imagine you sitting down with us, talking about how to tell a blackfeller¹ story in that most whitefeller of all places, the university.

Background Context/Setting the Scene

For several years, the criminology department at the University of New South Wales has attempted to educate its students about these realities. In 2018 circumstances brought together Aboriginal justice officer and criminology masters graduate Carly Stanley and ex-prisoner, youth worker and advocate Keenan Mundine with veteran youth worker and academic Howard Sercombe to teach Criminology students (and others)

about how Aboriginal people understood crime, criminals and the social conditions of their production.

Some clever design, and a little horse-trading and generosity on the part of the university, allowed the three of us to co-teach the course. It brought together the academic depth of the discipline with first-hand, up-close familiarity with the NSW criminal justice system and the experience of growing up poor and Aboriginal and, in Keenan's case, orphaned, on the streets of Sydney. The course took students on a journey through the Aboriginal experience of colonisation, institutionalisation and incarceration, informed by Keenan's insightful, emotionally present and sometimes stinging commentary on the world of criminal justice. Carly's initial supporting role quickly expanded to being a pivotal part of the process, bringing her extensive experience from inside and outside the system, and her experience as a First Nations woman, into the conversation.

We had a sense early on that something special was happening in the room. Students began talking to us about how the course was changing them, changing the course of their lives. We wanted to record that, and to put some foundation to our own conversations about the epistemological challenge of doing black and doing white, in the same space, on a university campus.

Who Is Here

In Aboriginal knowledge systems, who we are is important. In academic knowledge generation, in principle, it should not matter who says something: the knowledge is supported by the data and by the corpus of verified discourse that surrounds it. In the academy, we speak in the third person, and we avoid the personal pronoun, to give the illusion that this knowledge is authorless, that it exists independently of who it is who knows. Scientific discourse is de-subjectified, 'objective' knowledge.

Aboriginal knowledge is relational. Knowledge is understood to inhabit a person as the person is understood to be worthy of the knowledge that inhabits them. Knowledge is instantiated in the person, and

the person instantiated in their people, their community, their Country. We would begin any conversation by talking about who our people are, where we come from, our Country, and by acknowledging you and your people and Country and finding our connections to you (they will nearly always be there). So, we will begin with introductions.

Keenan (KM) is a Biripi/Wakka Wakka man in his mid-thirties, with lines of ancestry to northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. His grandparents moved to Sydney in the great urban migrations of the 1960s and 70s, so he grew up in Redfern, a key foothold for Aboriginal people in inner-city Sydney, and also a place of poverty, drug use and crime. He was orphaned at the age of seven. His mother passed of a drug overdose, and a short time later, his father, who had struggled for years with alcoholism, hanged himself. He and his two brothers were separated, and a series of compromised foster and care arrangements put him on the street as a young teenager.

KM: I first went in the juvenile justice system at the age of 14; and then in and out for most of my juvenile years. Then I turned 18 in the boys' home; I got released and then went on to adult imprisonment and spent my 18,19, 20, 21st birthdays in prison. Then I was out for six months. Then I spent another two and a half years in, then I was out, I met Carly and I went back in for another two and a half years.

Keenan now runs *Deadly Connections*² with Carly, his wife. *Deadly Connections* is an Aboriginal run NGO providing support and advocacy to justice-involved Aboriginal people in Sydney.

Carly (CS) grew up in Newtown, just a couple of kilometres from Redfern. She is a Wiradjuri woman, with lines of ancestry back to the western plains of New South Wales. An only child, she was brought up by her single mother and grandmother, but with a large extended family who was well known in Newtown. She had a daughter in her teens, and the responsibility of that took her back to study, finally graduating with a master's degree in criminology. She met Keenan at a party, in one of the brief periods of time in his twenties that he wasn't in prison and saw something in him. He went back to prison, but they kept in touch, and when he came out, they were both ready to do some work. She is a

committed, enormously hard-working advocate for Aboriginal people in contact with the law.

CS: I just think... you know obviously Keenan and Howard have their own wealth of experience, but they're two men! [laughs] But yeah, you know, having a female perspective is really important. I don't have lived personal experience of going to jail, but I did work for Corrective Services for a number of years in New South Wales, and having family members and a husband who's been involved in the justice system, but then also working in the actual justice system.

Howard (HS) is not Aboriginal. His family migrated from England in the 1960s to work with Aboriginal people in Wangkatha country near Kalgoorlie in central Western Australia, so he was embedded within Aboriginal community as a child and as a teenager (his parents were missionaries, in the evangelical tradition). In his twenties, he worked as a youth worker on the street with Aboriginal boys in social housing estates in Perth before being recruited to teach in one of Australia's first youth and community work degree programmes. After fifteen years as an academic, he went back to work as a youth worker in outback WA, mostly with Aboriginal kids, and then founded an Aboriginal youth service in Kalgoorlie. He returned to academia in 2005, teaching at an Aboriginal university college in Darwin before taking up a Chair in Community Education in Glasgow. He came back to Australia in 2017.

The combination works. The course is about the translation of Aboriginal experience into the criminological categories and back, and all three of us are fortunate to have spent most of our lives trading across the border, code-switching, moving between Aboriginal and European registers, Carly and Keenan from the blackfeller side, Howard from the whitefeller side, fluent in both.

HS: I think it is remarkable, because before our first week we had spent what? Half an hour? Yeah. It was just like we've been working together for years.

CS: We had one meeting for a coffee at Redfern and then we taught the next time we saw each other. This year will be four years: after the end of this semester, you'll be known as Uncle Howard (laughter).

Speaking of knowledge, we ought to share the theoretical foundations that we grounded the course in.

In a course like this, we need immediately to confront the question of knowledge. We begin the course by introducing students to the idea of epistemology, and then to the idea of multiple epistemologies, first in their own way of operating in the world and then in other worlds of other peoples. We look at the different 'ways of knowing' that you might use if you wanted to make and test a vaccine, or decide if your lover really loved you, or whether you should buy this house that you have been looking at, or what you think about a piece of music, or whether there is a God (see Sercombe, 2015). And we discover, through talking about how we *know* in these very different situations, that we use all sorts of epistemologies all of the time, running them in parallel, switching between them, trying to fit the right knowledge system to the right kind of situation.

This is, of course, a political problem. Knowledge is power. The ability to establish a monopoly on truth-making, whether that is the fifteenth-century Church or twentieth-century Science, brings with it massive influence and the resources that follow. The capacity to rule on the conditions for the establishment of truth is the key to the kingdom. They are jealously guarded, and competitors and challengers are vociferously seen off. Truth is singular, says the dominant fundamentalism. Other spheres of knowledge, the arts, for example, may be tolerated or even encouraged. But epistemic violence, the attempt to extinguish other knowledges and to silence those who bear them, is common where there are interests in play.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the process of colonisation (Seth, 2009). Colonisers cannot afford for the knowledge of Indigenous peoples to be recognised as truth. So Indigenous knowledge is traduced as superstition or witchcraft or folk tale or myth or nonsense. Or is silenced, passing without recognition: they have no law, no culture, no science, no agriculture. They are creatures of instinct, beasts of the field.

Indigenous Perspectives is an academic programme of study, taught at a university. Universities have long history of establishing the conditions for underwriting knowledge, for credentialling people who know, for creating and testing and validating claims to truth and putting the institutions in place to safeguard it. This has resulted in an enormously powerful intellectual engine, with massive consequences in terms of technology and the capacity to control our environment. The epistemology of the academy is disciplined and powerful and has been incredibly effective.

We don't denigrate the rigours and disciplines of science at all in the programme. This is typical of Aboriginal ways. Even in the processes of colonisation, there were always attempts to accommodate, to make room, to share (see the Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017). We don't try and tear academic criminology down. It is a perspective, and the truth that it tells is the truth that it tells.

It is also *partial*. If this course is to be taught as *criminology*, as the scientific inquiry into crime and criminals and the social conditions of their production, then the experience of offenders is located within the academic discourse, even if it's an Indigenous person teaching it (Johnson, 2020; Ogbu, 2004). Western Criminology will accept certain objects as being significant, and certain voices as being authoritative. That won't generally include the voices of criminals, especially Aboriginal criminals. Indeed, it won't generally include the voices of Aboriginal people, unless they are accredited by the academic world. Early in the course, we get students to read Frederick Roth's review of Chris Cunneen's *Aboriginal Perspectives on Criminal Justice* (1994). Of course, all the chapters that he likes are written by white criminologists and all the chapters he doesn't like are written by Aboriginal community members and activists. He can't hear the truth of what they say. It's low-status material, it's not worthy, it's not useful.

As a counter-example, in the first week or two of the course, we screen *Prison Songs*, a musical documentary set in Berrimah Gaol, in Darwin. In the production, Aboriginal prisoners tell their stories and work through a series of numbers, some playful, some serious, and some tragic (see <https://prisonsongs.com.au/thefilm/>). The *truth* of the documentary is patent. In numbers like 'What you learn from your mum and dad'

or 'Doing the white man's time' or 'Living in the middle' Aboriginal prisoners are doing criminology. Working with students with the documentary invites students to read the criminology in this very unacademic form.

What we are wanting to do is introduce students to these other epistemologies, these other knowledges: particularly, the knowledge of Aboriginal people. It recognises that there are Aboriginal epistemological frameworks that make sense of reality in profoundly different ways to that of academic inquiry. Perhaps obviously, given the penetration of the criminal justice system into Aboriginal people's lives, Aboriginal knowledges include knowing about crime and criminals and the social conditions of their production.

This is more than just a confrontation with 'lived experience'. Lived experience does not make sense of itself. It can be a feedstock for a range of epistemologies, including academic ones, and becomes knowledge in the process. Aboriginal offenders have a range of epistemologies available to them to make sense of their experience, and there may be a wide variety in how they and their people do that. But Aboriginal ways of truth-making, Aboriginal epistemologies, will be a part of that. So will the fact that Aboriginal lived experience occurs in the continuing crucible of colonisation.

If students are to understand, then they need to hold the criminology and the knowledge that Aboriginal people have about the Criminal Justice System in parallel with each other. Our experience is that the criminological discourse is limited in terms of changing the world, and in providing a transformative moment for the students. It is in the dialogue between these ways of knowing that students are confronted, are faced with the truth of both of them and face the requirement, under the glare of that truth, to change.

Pedagogically speaking, that's the core of the programme. How it works in the classroom is that often Howard will introduce the material in a fairly orthodox way, with a powerpoint presentation perhaps, often with some audio-visual content. Then Keenan and/or Carly will interrupt or interject, or Howard will say, 'So, Keenan. What do you think about that?' Or 'How does that connect with your experience?'

KM: I'm decoding that within my sort of language to be able to apply it to my experience and a majority of my people and my community's experience. And I do that on the run.

HS: And that's that is the way it often happens in the space. We use a lot of video and we are lucky in Australia that there's a lot of Aboriginal voice on film and on video. So we will use a variety of sources. We'll use poetry. We'll use fiction. We'll use documentary, or use music. I think one of the key things about the unit is teaching students to hear (and we do this right from the beginning, right?) getting students to hear criminology in a whole range of different kinds of sources and voices.

KM: Yeah, even though Howard in terms of the educational background holds a higher status it's not visible in the classroom. There's that mutual respect for my knowledge and mutual respect for his knowledge and Carly's knowledge and there's no one dominant knowledge in the classroom.

And then the students will get involved in the conversation, sometimes with Aboriginal students sharing their experience or the experience of their families, and we'll drop some other content in, or gather up points and make the theoretical connections. And then we run out of time.

Obstacles

Before we could get started, there were a few challenges that needed to be overcome. The first was that, as far as the university is concerned, Keenan is completely unqualified. He left school at fourteen. The second is that he has a criminal record, which includes violence. When we started, he hadn't been out of jail that long. There were reputational risks to be managed, and vulnerable students to protect. We were able to manage that to the satisfaction of the university because Howard does have a PhD and he and Keenan would always be working together.

The other problem was cost. We needed to have two people in the room—in fact we often had three. That requires that the university pays two salaries where normally they would only pay one. We had to do

some creative accounting: we only taught nine out of the twelve weeks with students doing online independent learning on the others, and one of us would be on a lecturer rate and the other on a demonstrator rate, on alternate weeks. Carly and Keenan unofficially shared a salary and worked out between them who would do what. But the School agreed to it, after some haggling, and we have worked roughly on that formula ever since.

The critical element of that was the advocacy of Phil Wadds, the Undergraduate Director. He negotiated with us, checked the politics and steered it through. When conflict has arisen, as it does from time to time (because those issues have not gone away) his support has been unwavering. It is difficult to see how we could have progressed without someone on the inside relentlessly pushing and pushing back.

The Programme

The curriculum for the course, after the introduction to multiple epistemologies, involves three main elements, and two special features.

The first major element is a confrontation with the history of colonisation in Australia. Most Australians have been brought up with a bleached view of our history, in which Australia was discovered by Captain Cook. Over the next century, settlers arrived and took up land. In the process, the original inhabitants were ('unfortunately') displaced and European diseases took a heavy toll. There were isolated 'clashes' with groups of Aboriginal people in response to the murder of settlers or the slaughter of their livestock, but the intentions of the colonisers were generally benign. Aboriginal people have not adapted well to the changing world, but the change was always coming, so the narrative goes, whether at the hands of the French or the Dutch or the Germans or the British.

It is clear now, and extensively documented, that this is a white-wash. The process was near-genocidal, with groups of settlers supported (and often led) by the police, moving through country shooting every Aboriginal person that they came across, and using hostile or captured Aboriginal people to find home camps and kill every man, woman and child in them. Documentary evidence now indicates over 270 recorded

massacres through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (the last recorded event was in 1928), and the work of unearthing them is unfinished (Sentance, 2020).

After the resistance was suppressed, a process of institutionalisation and child removal continued the genocide through into the 1960s. Many argue that current rates of child removal, under discourses of child protection, are not much different, and that the genocide continues (Douglas & Walsh, 2013).

The process of colonisation is not over, we argue. Sometimes it is expressed overtly, as in the Northern Territory Intervention (Altman & Russell, 2012). Sometimes the expression is more covert, as in the Suspect Target Management Plan (Bastable & Sentas, 2016). The laws, the police and the courts are all pivotal in this process. Aboriginal urbanisation has been accompanied by their criminalisation, by policing and surveillance.

Some students have come across a little of this material before, in history lessons at school. Most have not. Very few have heard it from Aboriginal people. It is a difficult story to tell, and to hear. But the criminological consequences are clear. For Aboriginal students, you can hear the sigh of relief as the air rushes in to make sense of their extended families' experience with the system. Non-Aboriginal students are often angry that their history has been hidden from them, sometimes ashamed that they have not taken more responsibility for knowing about the origins of their relative wealth and the clear consequences for the first inhabitants of this country.

The second element is an engagement with the very real social issues that Aboriginal communities face, like alcohol and other drug use, violence (including domestic violence), child removal, mental ill-health, school disconnection, poverty, community breakdown. Students learn how it feels to have to find a meal for your younger brothers and sisters, every day, and then get yourself to school. Or the police going through your house in the middle of the night, perhaps repeatedly. Or your dad disappearing into the system for months or years at a time. We discuss the role of the criminal justice system in producing these effects, the way that the police and the courts are mobilised to deal with things like drunkenness and public displays of anger, and the way that these issues

also funnel Aboriginal people into the criminal justice system, attended by another generation of child removal as social workers step in to protect children from their criminal parents.

The third element is a focus on the experience of Aboriginal women both as victims of crime, especially violence, but also as offenders, and of children and young people who are also criminalised early and in large numbers. We explore how the system repeatedly fails women who turn to it for protection, too often by arresting *them* for unpaid fines or disorderly behaviour, and/or by removing their children because the household is unsafe.

The two special features are the viewing of the *Prison Songs* musical documentary mentioned above, along with Keenan's commentary on it, and a walking tour of Redfern, Keenan's home community. Redfern is a now-gentrifying inner suburb of Sydney which was a 'zone of transition' (Burgess, 1923), and a key urban foothold for Aboriginal people in Sydney or for people moving to the city, notably after de-institutionalisation following the citizenship referendum in 1967.

KM: That was a highlight for most of the students, because not many of them would be comfortable to walk through my community.

CS: From the accounts that we've gotten it's been really, really important, a vital component of the unit that we're teaching. I think, you know, just us being a part of that community, and bumping into people along the way as the tour is going on you know. It's really powerful. Just to see like how connected we all are. Sometimes it'll be a handshake, sometimes it'll be a hug, sometimes it'll just be a nod, but there's that as well. That happens every two hundred yards without fail, you know, and every five minutes. If it's not him, it's me, or both of us combined, you know?

KM: They might have manoeuvred through that community in a taxi, or public transport, and just went 'Oh, this is a suburb called Redfern'. But until they went on the walk with me, then they got to see the Aboriginal community of Redfern.

CS: Yeah, and how visible we are, but you're not seeing it unless you're open to seeing it.

The thing about the Redfern experience is that it embodies Aboriginal ways. We are moving through space, through physical geographical space, and we are moving in a blackfeller way through that space. We are on foot. We aren't in the main street: we move through routes that connect Aboriginal spaces and avoid exposure. We cross the road from the railway station, past the unmarked police car that is permanently parked at the threshold of the Block, the Aboriginal quarter where Keenan grew up, past Junkie's Alley, past the boxing club, past the multi-storey with the police station in the top floor, with cameras and telescopes overlooking the Block.

The places on the route that Keenan leads us through are full of remembrances, full of events and full of people. One of the things that we talked about in the unit is the way that Aboriginal epistemologies are much more focused on space than on time. The students start to get a feel for that, for how white people would see the death of this person as now fading because it happened years ago, but as Keenan moves through the space, the death of this person was at that place, and it's vivid now. So, in the physical space of it, students start to get an idea of what an Aboriginal life might be like in the city, outside the 'tribal' way of life.

HS: It is that confrontation, which once they get it they go 'Yeah, of course.' That culture is a living breathing thing. Aboriginal culture now isn't the same as it was in 1788. How could it be? But it is still Aboriginal culture. What Aboriginal culture means now in Redfern becomes visible for them.

KM: I think one of the biggest things for me was a mature age student, reading their reflection and her saying they feel like they've failed because they weren't taught this stuff earlier.

CS: I think it wasn't even a reflection. It was a handwritten note that she'd given to us at the final class. She said like I'm sorry for not... she's apologizing for not either seeking that information out or having that information given to her prior to her 40 -something years

HS: She'd grown up in Redfern, right? I think so. A white woman and she just didn't know that there was this other kind of layer.

The Subaltern Voice: In the Room Where It Happens

An essential part of decolonising the curriculum for us was decolonising the space. That meant re-inhabiting it, moving Aboriginality into the room. As is typical for Aboriginal ways of knowing, that is embodied, incarnate: two Aboriginal bodies in the space, plus usually about half a dozen, four or five, Aboriginal students among the student body. There are things that they say and reflections they make and stories they tell, but the *particularity* of this experience in the context of an academic unit on criminology is powerful.

CS: I think with any university unit it's always academic focused, you know? I think the difference between other units and the delivery of this unit really is the lived experience of having two Aboriginal people, a man and a woman, ... I guess we share many similarities in terms of our experiences of over policing and the way that our community views police. And I guess the way that the criminal justice system is intersected with our life - from babies. In different ways.

I think a lot of the students would not have access to somebody like Keenan or me in any other scenario, and the fact that they've got us in the classroom where it's a safe space for learning, for asking questions, for gaining knowledge, for passing knowledge on is really unique.

KM: I think just having Carly and myself in the university is part of decolonizing that space in terms of bringing culture and First Nations people to the forefront of learning about the things that affect us. For me, trying to understand my experience whilst being a part of this course has validated why it was the way it was. Because things were so designed for me to be in that experience. There were parameters outside of me and my family that we had no control over which was structurally designed to keep us in these spaces.

The academic world works on abstractions, on statistical representations of things. The objective in academic practice is for the knowledge to transcend its particularity, to become universal and context free (Wolfenden

et al., 2019). Academics take the data and rework it so it loses its specificity and becomes more than ‘just anecdotal’. Individual conflicts are aggregated into new, abstract objects like ‘the crime rate’.

The students generally have a reasonable handle on the objective position of Aboriginal people in the Criminal Justice System. They know all the statistics before they come to class. They know about the over-representation of Aboriginal people. They know about over-policing and the rate at which Aboriginal people are given community orders versus detention, compared to the rest of the community. But they don’t know Keenan’s story, they don’t know Carly’s story. And the *particularity* of that breaks open the statistics.

HS: Keenan’s contribution to this is profound. Around a third of the prison population is Aboriginal, so there’s no shortage of people with experience of poverty and bereavement and incarceration. But what is rare is the capacity to be articulate about that, to talk about that experience in ways that are emotionally present, that connect. There isn’t anybody who isn’t damaged by that kind of trauma, but Keenan has remained human and connected and expressive about it. When Keenan talks about losing his mum and dad as a seven-year-old, and his dad hanging himself in the little park, the vacant site that he had to pass to go to school: you can see that little kid in the room. There’s a little kid here: he’s lost his mum and dad, and he’s poor, and he’s trying to go to school, and being bounced around from family and into institutions. Finally some bigger boys look after him. And they look after him by introducing him to the criminal economy. You can feel that.

For the students, it’s shocking. Here are two real live human beings with emotion and with feelings, people who’ve lost members of their family, and had people close to them killed by police, or died in custody. They are here in front of you. That’s not the story of an academic unit. An academic unit can be taught by any qualified academic and the literature is represented in such a way that in principle it doesn’t matter who wrote it. But here you have this sharp-edged particularity with the human story *present*.

Confronting Emotion

There is no doubt that the academic context and the practice of depersonalisation limits personal costs. An academic epistemology seeks to eliminate the emotion from the analysis, concentrating on how we think about something, not how we feel about it. Emotional response to the material might happen, but it needs to happen somewhere else. Academics generally can choose to limit their own personal engagement: indeed, some disengagement from the emotional response to the material is more or less required.

In this course, the emotion is in the room. Keenan and Carly have to pay a higher price: the personalisation of knowledge comes at a cost. It takes generosity to be able to be prepared to give that back—and to give that back to the people who have been part of the system that has created those injustices.

KM: It's a double-edged sword. I have to relive my trauma, but as part of my healing process i need to acknowledge my experience.

CS: I think also for me, as difficult as it is, we've grown significantly as individuals over the last couple of years, and learned how to take better care of ourselves. When we started we were just all in, and we've felt the effects of not taking care of each other or ourselves as individuals, and it impacts on everything. So we've learned some hard lessons. We're much better at acknowledging that and taking care of ourselves. I think for me the reason I'm happy to do that is because I have heard and understand the impact that it has on the students. We know that they're going to be our future leaders, like they're going to be our future politicians and our future you know whoever, lawyers. Also the reach that we get, like we would never get to the kids that are... There might be you know some underlying bias or racism. We've had that a couple of times, with some students where they've expressed some - but we're able to... they're open to changing their mind and that's what makes the difference, yeah.

HS: I have been a bit concerned from time to time. I mean Keenan's experience is so distressing: deep injustice and violence and just tragedy. And he is so raw in the way that he tells that story. I have been watchful and

checking with him, saying, you know, 'Is this okay with you?' I think there's lots of unique and powerful things about the way that Keenan works, but - I don't know if you call it the zen of him - using the disclosure also for healing - so the double edge of that I think has been reassuring. I mean I still do worry from time to time but we do keep an eye on it in the space.

Being emotionally present with the story in the room also has implications for students. There are revelations about the nature of their world and their country that they have never had to deal with before.

KM: I'm very mindful of it. I equate it to my own experience of having my world ripped open, like when losing my parents or being taken from my family. Some of the stuff that they do learn in here is going to reshape their reality. It's also going to make them a little bit angry and infuriated at the systems that didn't teach them earlier on this stuff.

CS: I think we always pre-empt the unit with self-care: if things are distressing you can leave the room, we always do that, right Howard?

HS: But we also want them to feel.

CS: Yeah, yeah,

We don't want to protect them from the emotional impacts of this. We want them to feel them: because the world view of everyday Australians needs to change around this. We perpetuate a number of national mythologies about ourselves that need to be destroyed. That's painful and the pain is okay. So we also don't want to protect students from feeling and therefore from change. But we need to manage that. We have no interest in perpetuating trauma ourselves.

A growing body of research connects emotional connection with personal and social change (Flam & King, 2007; Jasper, 2011; Lemmings & Brooks, 2014; Nos Aldas & Pinazo, 2013). If the purpose of criminology is to not only interpret the world, but to change it, the opportunity for connection to anger, to shame, to compassion, to grief,

to collective guilt, and also to joy and relief and pride and admiration is critical.

So What Did We Want Students to Learn, in the End?

For every course, there is a list of learning outcomes written down in the course materials. In practice, the process of listening and interacting with students and working with the literature and the other course materials creates its own list, which might tally with the one in the course documents and might not. Each of us had our own take on this. For Keenan, the key learning outcome was that nobody should be written off, but that is precisely what the system does.

KM: I think, from my point of view, that all the evidence and the research around experiences like mine comes to the conclusion that once an individual is in there they cannot make it back.

But here I am. I show them how even though I'm not a part of that world anymore, it still impacts me every day. That real life human element to what one individual, in terms of those stats, has to go through. And then what they have to go through to come out of it. And then how that impacts his immediate family, his community, everything that I do.

The main thing that I want them to learn is that this system is not broken, it's well designed. Its been deliberately designed. We're throwing billions of dollars at incarceration, and nothing at rehabilitation, or giving people opportunities when they come back into the community to get accommodation, housing. It is so well designed that once you go to prison, when you come out, you're still a part of that system.

For Carly, it is about shifting the fundamentals.

CS: I think for me it's more about understanding. First, that locking people up doesn't make communities safer, that's a huge one. Then that there are systemic things in play that lead to the over representation.

We're not locking up people that are bad, we're locking up people that are traumatized, that are poor, that are mentally unwell, and that are black.

For Howard, the key thing is that wants students to learn to *listen*. Academic approaches are so frequently about telling.

HS: I really want them to learn that the academic stuff is powerful, important, disciplined. It needs to be honoured, but it's partial, it's limited. So being able to see criminology in Redfern Now (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012) or Charlie's Country (De Heer & Gulpilil, 2013) or some of the brilliant novels that have come out of recent years written by Aboriginal people, you know? To be able to do that intelligent translation and recognition of truth across those sources. To be able to listen.

Student feedback was consistently indicating that we might actually be succeeding. We would like to be able to paste in all the student comments that we have received, but the following two are, for different reasons, representative.

Student 1: The content of the course was often times hard to hear but was unbelievably important to learn. The course completely shifted my view of the history of Australia and the workings of the criminal justice system. It was an incredibly motivating course and inspired activism and a desire for change in myself. The firsthand stories from Keenan were crucial in this. This course has had the most significant impact on me throughout my time at UNSW.

Student 2: This course was the most respectful course I have ever done at UNSW and being an Aboriginal woman I felt respected, acknowledged, appreciated and felt safe. They both worked so well and effectively alongside each other. This course should be a compulsory subject, because the way they both teach is real, knowledgeable, respectful and important for people to actually understand, acknowledge and learn about Aboriginal culture and history by such knowledgeable, influential people.

Conclusion

Criminology in Australia, as a discipline, is stridently critical of the treatment of Aboriginal people within the criminal justice system. Study after study, report after report, details in excruciating detail the processes by which Aboriginal people are fast-tracked into justice involvement and ultimately incarceration, with ongoing consequences for their families and communities. Yet the rate of Aboriginal incarceration continues to climb and policies of intervention designed to coerce Aboriginal people into more compliant (and, also, less destructive) ways of living merely provide another set of reasons to arrest and charge and remove the children.

KM: There is knowledge that the university holds which makes it very cynical for me. They know the problem, but nobody's coming with solutions. I can't comprehend that the smartest minds within our nation just keep telling us problems, not actually using their time and resources to come up with alternatives, to come up with solutions, to come up with processes to combat and to end the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people.

Notwithstanding the anger of criminologists, and often their committed activism about this, criminology has its own case to answer. Postcolonial theory would argue that academic criminology shares with other branches of scientific endeavour the universal, objective pretensions of colonialist knowledge (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010), pointing out the epistemological violence involved in the unilateral imposition of Western science, and the way that the university silences voices that are not scientific.

This is not a necessary position for Western science, including criminology, to take. Already, universities are host to multiple epistemological perspectives, even from within their own walls. Nobody believes there is a single valid epistemology anymore. The recognition that there is truth in Aboriginal thinking about crime and criminalisation, and the capacity to stop and listen, not talk over, not talk for Aboriginal people, might open up the conversation and generate new possibilities for change.

CS: And I guess that's the point, yeah? Academia has been pretty impotent when it comes to driving change, criminology included, or to making a real difference. The studies mount up and the problems roll on, you know? Where change has happened it's because people reached out. And like, were prepared to let other knowledges invade and challenge. Challenge the idea that all the truth is in the stats. Decolonise the academy a bit (laughs). That's when you see change.

This chapter is the story of when a university opened up a little, held its breath about its reputational risk, and was prepared to put a little more money than the minimum into resourcing this learning. It created a space where it was possible to hear the ongoing human, social consequences of colonial dispossession and genocide (Behrendt, 2001; Cunneen, 2009). It helped students see the contemporary expressions of colonial power through the criminalisation of Aboriginal communities as an ongoing colonial project (Altman & Russell, 2012; Cunneen, 2020; Veracini, 2015). But especially, it allowed the colonised to speak back to power (Spivak & Riach, 2016). For the first time for these criminology students, Aboriginal people were leading the conversation in the room where it happens.

Top Tips: Decolonising Learning and Teaching

- Have Aboriginal/subaltern people in the room. A criminal record is a qualification, not a disqualification.
- Doing this well will cost a bit more. But the wealth of universities in the West is built on stolen land, stolen human beings, stolen resources. The case is good: drive the bargain.
- Actively explore epistemological pluralism, including the power and limitation of academic epistemologies and the inclination towards epistemological violence. Practice epistemological equivalence in the way that Aboriginal voices are heard and honoured. Develop skills of epistemological translation.
- If possible, take people out of the classroom into Aboriginal/subaltern spaces.

- Don't be afraid of emotion. Emotion is what changes things.

Notes

1. 'Blackfeller' is often the way that we as Indigenous Australians speak about ourselves.
2. 'Deadly', in Aboriginal English, means 'really good'.

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