Chapter 3
Reflecting on a Way of Being: Anchor Principles of Cultural Competence

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Introduction

A critical self-reflective practice is essential to cultural competence development. Importantly, critical self-reflection must facilitate intimate knowledge about who you are and how you are positioned in the world, and the consequences of that positioning. Within institutional settings, each of us, as employees, is inevitably bounded by the policies, structures and values of the institution. However, our individual identities, socialisation and worldviews will inform how we interpret those institutional boundaries, and how we embody and perform our personal values and boundaries. Cultural competence is not just a skill to be learned; it is a way of being. Sara Ahmed, (2017) talks about feminism as "homework": the work we do at home as well as at work. Ahmed contends that while we might retreat to theory and locate our work there, in fact "we have to bring feminist theory home because feminist theory has been too quickly understood as something we do when we are away from home (as if feminist theory is what you learn when you go to school)" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 8). Ahmed's point resonates strongly with the work of cultural competence. As much as we might engage with theory to deepen our understanding and develop our skills, an authentic cultural competence is not something that can be turned on at work or in specific situations. It is the work we do at home. It is how we live our lives; it is a way of being.

Cultural competence is commonly seen as a cumulative, non-sequential journey or continuum of learning (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Perso, 2012; Ranzjin, McConnochie, & Nolan, 2009; UA, 2011; Wells, 2000). Conceptualising cultural competence as a way of being highlights the process which I experience as a process of unknowing and knowing, of deconstructing and reconstructing. It is a journey inward to self as well as outward to community. It is the skill of untangling

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who you are and how you hold yourself in engagement and dialogue with difference and diversity. It requires honesty as well as deep and critical thinking, but it also requires experiences. This is the "homework" we have to do; we can approach cultural competence as theory—or we can dive in, live it and experience it.

At its essence, cultural competence is about relationships, trust and dialogue: dialogue with yourself and with others. As we get to know and understand ourselves better, we are better able to know and understand others. Like any relationships, sometimes we are ready for the conversation and other times we choose to avoid the prickly parts; or we don't yet have the language or experience to understand them. Cultural competence work is the work of untangling, unpicking and revealing layers as we move through life. We move forward, then circle back to revisit and gain more understanding, more knowledge and more practice, enabling us to engage at ever-deepening levels.

This chapter aims to set out my way of being as an educator in cultural competence. When I think about my own cultural competence journey, I recognise four key aspects of my worldview which anchor my way of being: social justice, knowing self, re-storying and action.

The context in which I am doing this reflection is as an English-Australian White woman who works in the National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC), at the University of Sydney, where we lead thinking and education about cultural competence. The work of the NCCC is particularly informed and inspired by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and contexts. Part of my role is to develop educational resources for staff and students and conduct research on various aspects of cultural competence.

The Cultural Competence Imperative

The NCCC was established with an initial primary focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence. This is in keeping with a move, in very recent times, among Australian universities to achieve greater inclusion of cultural competence in the higher education sector, specifically to address disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Universities Australia (UA) states that cultural competence is:

> The ability to critically reflect on one's own culture and professional paradigms in order to understand its cultural limitations and effect positive change. (UA, 2011, p. 3)

The impact of cultural incompetence on peoples' lives is real and harmful, particularly for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, 97% of Aboriginal people regularly experience racism (Ferdinand, Paradies, & Kelaher, 2013). Aboriginal men can expect to live 10.6 years less than other Australian men; Aboriginal women can expect to live 9.5 years less than other Australian women (ABS, 2013); and 28% of the prison population identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, even though they represent less than 3% of the total Australian

population (ABS, 2018). For young people, the incarceration rate is even higher with 55% of youths in juvenile detention identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander—a rate 27 times higher than the rate of detention of non-Indigenous youths (AIHW, 2016). In the Northern Territory, 100% of youths in detention are Aboriginal (Allam, 2019). These statistics are selected from many which reinforce the necessity of developing good cultural competence.

Often, though, these statistics are used to justify deficit dialogue and problematise Aboriginal people, rather than being used to point to ongoing issues of racism, colonialism, decolonising and oppression, and knowledge about how dominant cultures maintain power (Downing & Kowal, 2011, p. 5). Meaningful and sustainable change will only be created when these underlying narratives and practices are addressed. It is through this lens that I approach cultural competence.

Anchor Principles of a Culturally Competent Way of Being

There are many aspects to cultural competence; however, when I conceptualise the practice, I am drawn back to some key principles which frame my approach.

Social Justice

In order to embed cultural competence, it is recognised that universities need to develop an organisational culture that is committed to social justice and human rights, and which values and supports Indigenous cultures, knowledges and peoples "as integral to the core business of the institution" (UA, 2011, p. 3).

Just over 53 years ago, the 1967 Referendum promised a new equitable relationship between First Nations peoples and mainstream Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would enjoy the same rights and protections as all Australians (Behrendt, 2003, p. 13). Behrendt states that since 1967 it has "become increasingly evident that the formal structures and institutions within Australia have not changed enough to equalise—let alone reverse—the socioeconomic impact of colonisation and past government policies and practices" (Behrendt, 2003, p. 13). In fact, the evidence would suggest that there has been no will to change the institutions in substantive ways.

A lack of substantive change means that people continue to suffer greatly. The doctor who makes an incorrect assessment about a person's illness based on their racist perceptions about Aboriginal people; the lawyer who assumes guilt because of a client's Aboriginality; the prison staffer whose indifference to the heat in the back of a paddy wagon causes a man in custody to die; the Federal Government policy that suspends the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and bluntly casts Aboriginal people as alcoholics who sexually abuse their children; the HSC students who racially attack an Aboriginal poet because they didn't like their examination; the football fans who

racially vilify Aboriginal players; the taxi driver who refuses to stop for Aboriginal passengers; the list goes on and on. Members of the dominant non-Indigenous society generally remain oblivious to these "everyday" acts of racism that are familiar to those from minorities and oppressed groups. Racism and injustice present a constant cacophony of insults and barbs which have ongoing and negative impacts on the recipients of such behaviours.

Social justice is concerned with the conditions for persons to participate in community and in society, enjoying their full human flourishing (Brennan in Rowse, 2012, p. viii). Social justice recognises that our society is socially constructed and stratified and that some people have access to resources and are valued more highly. It recognises that relations of unequal power are constantly being enacted and we are all socialised into complicity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014, p. 2).

Social justice is a driving principle for me, particularly in the context of a settler-colonial country like Australia where cultural competence must address racism, privilege and Whiteness, and ongoing colonialism. Earlier in my professional life, I was able to gain some practical understanding of positionality, privilege and Whiteness through both work and personal relationships. However, it was not until I commenced my PhD studies that I engaged theoretically. It was through the process of grappling with Indigenous methodologies that I engaged in a more considered examination of what it means to be a White person in this context. Guided by the literature written by Indigenous scholars such as Judy Atkinson, Karen Martin, Lester-Irabinna Rigney and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I started to "turn the gaze"; that is, rather than focusing on engaging non-Indigenous people to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, I understood the importance of non-Indigenous people turning the gaze on ourselves to learn not only about who we are as cultural beings, but also how we interact with, and impact on, the systems that continue to marginalise and exclude. These are the areas that tend to create the most resistance in our education programmes.

It should come as no surprise that non-Indigenous people often resist talking about and examining concepts such as privilege and Whiteness; as DiAngelo (2011) explains, "White fragility is alive and well". Privilege is hard for the privileged to identify and then to know what to do about it. An important cultural competence shift for privileged people (like me) to make is to racialise ourselves. Change will not happen when we continue to talk about the "Other" but not address our own racial identities, power and privileges. This work must always be guided and informed by, and in relationship with, Aboriginal and other minoritised peoples. The danger is that done badly, it becomes about "us" and how we feel and our limited self-knowledge, and blinkers about our racial identity confine us to perpetuating ignorance and silence about injustice.

Eddo-Lodge (2017, p. 92) describes Whiteness as "a manipulative, suffocating blanket of power that envelops everything we know like a snowy day". It is omnipresent and yet it is also about absences:

> White Privilege is an absence of the consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost, an absence of "less likely to succeed because of my race." It is an absence of funny looks

directed at you because you're believed to be in the wrong place, an absence of cultural expectations, an absence of violence enacted on your ancestors because of the colour of their skin, an absence of subtle marginalisation and othering—exclusion from the narrative of being human. (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 86)

It is the absences that can make it hard for people to engage with White Privilege. It is hard for most of us to examine what is not there, rather than what is, especially when that avoidance is supported and reinforced by our social norms and institutional structures. A crucial aspect of cultural competence is to develop the ability to surface and engage with those absences; to see those things that are often unseen by the privileged.

A privilege that is often unseen in the higher education sector is understanding how the dominance of western knowledge systems and structures has created unsafe environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and has overtly contributed to the colonisation process, and this creates particular challenges (Riley, Howard-Wagner, Mooney, & Kutay, 2013, p. 256). Battiste (2013) describes three tensions in decolonising education spaces. First, the struggle to sensitise the Euro-centric consciousness in general, and educators in particular, to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalise and racialise Indigenous students; second, convincing non-Indigenous people to acknowledge the unique knowledges and relationships that Indigenous people derive from place and their homeland; and third, there is a tension for all learners to learn respectfully with Aboriginal people, without appropriating their new knowledge and experience for their own ends.

Knowing Self

One of the challenges of cultural competence education is that, by its nature, individual behavioural change is often the focus, rather than systemic behavioural change being promoted. Many programmes grow out of the cultures and intellectual traditions of the dominant society and focus on cultural awareness, which effectively reinforces the dominant culture (Young, 1999). Acquiring knowledge about other cultures limits learning about ourselves and our cultures (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009) and usually avoids addressing institutional racism and oppression (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 180; Garran & Werkmeister, 2013). Almost certainly, many programmes avoid the kind of critical thinking which addresses ongoing traumas arising from colonisation and racism. Without critical thinking, cultural competence becomes a safe alternative, complicit in avoiding difficult conversations about racism and individuals' beliefs or their "heart and soul" (Yoon, 2012, p. 598) and difference is identified as dysfunction rather than ongoing effects of trauma, colonisation and racism (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013, p. 108).

At one level, cultural competence is about the ability to relate to people who may be of different cultures to oneself, including all aspects of cultures such as race, gender and sexuality. To relate to difference effectively, it is fundamental that one knows oneself. We are all constructed of multiple identities, and how we embody

our identities and walk and act in the world is critical to understanding who we are; not only those things that are easily observable—such as what we eat, the holidays we celebrate, the clothes we wear, the languages we speak—but who we are at a deeper level. This includes understanding not only what our worldview is, but how it was formed. It means searching for clarity about how we were socialised, what our biases are and where they come from.

This is harder than it sounds, particularly for those of us from dominant White cultures. Often, in workshops, I ask participants to share just one thing about their culture. This seemingly simple question can flummox people, particularly those who identify as Australian. I am frequently told, "I have no culture; I'm Australian". White Australians have not had to develop a racial identity (Sisneros, 2008, p. 29), unlike people of colour who, whether or not they choose to be, are often labelled by their visible racial identity. This is exemplified by Nyadol Nyuon when she tweeted: "I am uncomfortable when, in media interviews, I am referred to as a South Sudanese lawyer. It would be accurate to refer to me as commercial lawyer" (Nyuon, 2018).

We are all cultural beings and have multiple identities. I identify as English, Australian, a woman, an educator, a wife, a daughter, an aunt, a friend and as White. The absences of how you identify can also be telling. I usually "forget" to identify that I am heterosexual, for example; this aspect of my identity is never challenged and is usually invisible to me. Likewise, it would not have occurred to me to identify as White in the earlier part of my life.

I always apply the "so what" test to self-reflection. It is easy to say, I'm a White middle-class, middle-aged immigrant woman from England. But, so what? It is not enough to just identify who we are, or even to make visible the identities that are so normalised that we forget we have them. We also need to critique how this influences and impacts on our interactions with people of different cultures and, most importantly, how we interact with and benefit from existing social structures. As Kondrat (1999) says, "advocates of critical reflectivity start with the supposition that all people and institutions somehow contribute to the oppressive behaviours and practices that perpetuate inequality" (quoted in Sisneros, 2008, p. 23). It is this exploration of how we, and the institutions and systems in which we participate, contribute to perpetuating inequality that is essential for cultural competence. As Razack highlights:

> encounters between dominant and subordinate groups cannot be "managed" simply as peda-gogical comments requiring cultural, racial or gender sensitivity. Without understanding how responses to subordinate groups are socially organised to sustain existing power arrange-ments, we cannot hope either to communicate across social hierarchies or to work to eliminate them. (Razack, 1994, p. 8)

Self-reflection is by its nature problematic because not only is it socially constructed (Sisneros, 2008, p. 21), but it is also questionable whether one can really know one's self. It is hard to view the world outside our enculturated "attitudes, presuppositions, biases, and assumptions" (Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili, 1992, p. 24), and this inability to self-examine can lead to a "self-confirming cycle, where we reinforce our own beliefs" (Brookfield, 1998, p. 197). However, failure to engage

in this work leaves one unprepared for engaging in relationships in a multicultural environment (Sisneros, 2008). Self-reflection does not just happen and is a capability that needs to be intentionally developed. My aim, as an educator, is for transformative learning which Mezirow (2003) defines as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change".

Developing effective critical self-reflection skills is an essential component of cultural competence. Without it, reflection can be superficial and fail to lead to a lack of disruption or change in thinking or actions, whereas critical self-reflection involves social and political analyses which lead to transformative changes (Fook, White, & Gardner, 2006, p. 9).

Re-storying

At the NCCC, we situate our work in the theory of cultural competence. However, we are also committed to decolonising praxis, discussion of which is generally absent from much of the cultural competence literature. One of the NCCC's core values is to draw on Indigenous Knowledges (IKs), and work in collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff to challenge structures and knowledge systems in the higher education space, which continues to discriminate and exclude.

Decolonising the academy in the NCCC context is about subversion, which Sefa Dei (2016, p. 28) identifies as "putting a critical gaze on structures and process of educational delivery" (i.e. the structures and process of teaching, learning and administering education) that continually create and reproduce sites of marginality and colonising education for learners. For those of us who are non-Indigenous, working to a decolonising agenda raises interesting personal and pedagogical issues about our place in this space, of which we must be acutely cognizant. Importantly, this focus on decolonising knowledges avoids a critical element of returning land. As Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 7) explain:

> decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically.

Sefa Dei (2016, p. 29) also makes the vital connection between decolonisation, land and IKs. He says that without addressing issues of social justice and inclusion within the academy, there will be:

> progressive and global emptying not only of knowledge but of bodies, of diversity, of creativity, of potential and kinetic energy, and of life. Transformation can only be realised when there is a space and pale for the natural world, the land and for bodies that hold and carry knowledge to engage their right to know, to show, and to tell their knowing their way transparently and without negative repercussion or obliterating neutrality.

This idea also points to Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi's (2009) dialogue about re-storying and truth-telling which they identify as a form of resistance to colonisation (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 147). Stories in this context are "lived values that form the basis for Indigenous governance and regeneration" (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 138). They must connect to Indigenous ways of storytelling and "cannot be disentangled from ongoing relationships to their homeland" (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 147).

Recognising and deconstructing narratives is a powerful way to disrupt dominant narratives of oppression. As Razack (2000, p. 182) reminds us, "national narratives are those of the dominant group". They are also a tool of colonisation; as Said explains, "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said quoted in Razack, 2000, p. 182). This point is also explored by Sensoy and DiAngelo: "Patterns, although enacted by individuals, accrue collectively at the group level and are the result of socialization; they are not 'our fault,' but we are responsible for becoming aware of and interrupting them".

Consequently, with the intention of engaging with a decolonising lens, I increasingly frame our programmes around recognising, deconstructing and re-storying national, institutional and personal narratives which are "overarching stories, guiding myths or metaphors", and one of the "primary modes of knowing for humans" (Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015, p. 152). Taking a re-storying approach creates space for diverse knowledges and Indigenous retelling of narratives. It also makes space for truth-telling and, in doing so, allows for what Corntassel et al. (2009, p. 138) call the re-storying of the "dominant culture version of history; that is, we must make decolonizing space for Indigenous history—counter narratives of diplomacy, law and peacemaking practices—as told by Indigenous people themselves". The crucial piece to this work, and often the hardest for the resistors to engage with, is to question the underlying assumptions embedded into narratives (Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015, p. 155). An inability to adequately challenge these assumptions, or understand the deep narrative basis for the assumptions, will lead to a lack of transformation.

Deep deconstructing of narratives creates space not only for different perspectives, experiences and truths, but also for non-Indigenous settlers to question the narratives that the nation-state, the media, our families and we as individuals hold up as immutable facts. It allows for a more honest exploration of our relationship to Aboriginal lands and peoples, and it creates an opportunity to more accurately retell our shared histories. It also leads us to action because "processes of re-storying and truth-telling are not effective without some larger community-centred, decolonising actions behind them" (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 139).

Action

As I stated earlier in this chapter, my commitment to cultural competence is a commitment to transformation—of myself, the institution and broader society. Although

cultural competence starts with the self, it is not enough to only change one's thinking. hooks reminds us of Freire when she says that conscientisation is not an end in itself; it is necessary to verify in praxis what we know in consciousness (hooks, 1994, p. 47). If we consider that institutions become institutions because the things they do become habit—or, as Ahmed explains, are "how we do things here", where the very claim of a "how" does not need to be claimed—we might describe institutionalisation as "becoming background", where being "in" the institution is to "agree" with what becomes background (Ahmed, 2017, p. 25). Likewise, we might describe cultural competence as surfacing what becomes background and taking the steps to create change. What those steps look like will depend on the context.

In our workshops, we end with participants creating personal action plans. We remind people that the task might seem immense but that each of us can create change in our own contexts, and to break it into smaller achievable actions. Importantly, however, the focus must extend beyond the individual. Cultural change can only be sustainable when it has become systemic; when it becomes background and "how we do things here". To that end, leadership and organisational commitment to change is a vital part of cultural competence work. Importantly, strategic intent must be translated into tangible behaviours and actions across the organisation.

Conclusion

As an educator, I am constantly reflecting on the boundaries of our work, how far to push and when to pull back. This is particularly pertinent in an institutional setting where people have not necessarily invited you to prod and poke their innermost beliefs and values. This is personal work, challenging work, and if we are true to the theory that we are all on a journey we have to allow that people have their own itineraries and allow them to set their own course to an extent. This is also community work. You cannot be a cultural competence island: cultural competence can only be developed in relationship to others. Another critical aspect of the work is how we institutionalise it. If we focus on the individual, we miss the imperative to enhance institutional enablers and dismantle barriers.

Cultural competence is about creating change. It is not a warm and fuzzy "tick a box" exercise to make us feel good, and it is not enough to be only aware of our context and cultures. We also need to take action. There is a requirement for change in this work, of ourselves and our society. I hope that we can ensure that every one of our students is able to understand how their world has been constructed, and how those constructs and the lenses through which they perceive it and their actions impact on the people they work for and with, whether that is as a doctor, a nurse, a banker, a magistrate or a footballer and knowing all that then they can work towards change.

This reflection has been a short exploration of some of the underpinning concepts that anchor my approach to cultural competence. Surfacing and explaining these

anchors is critical self-reflection in practice and assists in asserting my philosophical and pedagogical approach to teaching and researching cultural competence.

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