

Chapter 3

Authentically Modifying a First-Year Psychology Subject



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Abstract This chapter describes the way that collaboration with local Elders led to revision of a first-year psychology subject. We outline the changes that were made to several critical areas including teaching students about critical reflection and how to work effectively. The Wiradyuri way of living and pedagogical framework were foundational to the revision. This new approach led us to reflect on, and change the nature and types of assessment. In this chapter we illustrate the way that authentic Aboriginal knowledge and pedagogy became an integral part of an existing subject. It demonstrates that the process of decolonising curriculum can occur through partnership under the guidance of local Elders. We anticipate that this will lead to greater cultural safety and better learning for Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students and teachers.

Introduction

We start this chapter by introducing ourselves.

Jillene: I am a non-aboriginal woman from Sydney NSW, living in Wiradyuri country (Bathurst, NSW). The first person in my immediate family to complete a tertiary degree, I have worked as a university lecturer for 17 years. I co-wrote and taught the subject that is the topic of this chapter in 2009 with the aim of addressing the gap in knowledge of First Nations Australian history and cultures in Psychology.

Mallyan: I am a Wiradyuri Elder who is 75 years old. I was nurtured by my birth mother and by Wiradyuri women whom I all referred to as mother and was initiated into manhood by my father and a group of male Wiradyuri Elders. From the beginning I was taught that Yindyamarra is not just a word, it is the way of life for Wiradyuri people that encompasses a set of principles that is adaptable to many other cultures.

Wirribee: I am a proud Wiradyuri woman from Dubbo NSW. I currently live on my father's part of Country Bathurst NSW. I have always been immersed in my

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Wiradyuri culture ever since I can remember. I honour my Old People by passing on cultural knowledge through education.

Simone: I am a non-aboriginal woman living in Dubbo on Wiradjuri country, teaching at University for 9 years. My cultural knowledge has been gained through experience, including learning from my extended Aboriginal and Tongan family. I hope for greater knowledge, understanding and an appreciation of Indigenous Australian cultures will allow for meaningful Reconciliation in this country.

Leonie: I am a non-aboriginal woman from Sydney NSW, living in Yuiin country (Wollongong, NSW). I am the first person in my immediate family to complete a tertiary degree and have worked as an academic for 10 years. I have been involved with Indigenous knowledges and perspectives at UOW since early 2018, I participated in the Jindaola programme that challenges academics to find authentic, meaningful ways to integrate Indigenous knowledges into their discipline teaching.

This chapter is about the modification of a first-year psychology subject which had been part of the curriculum for 10 years. The original subject was created to meet the requirements of the Indigenous Education Strategy (IES) of the university, an aim of which was to embed Indigenous Australian perspectives throughout all degrees.¹ The initiative at the university followed closely from the Curriculum Guidelines for Psychology (Ranzijn, McConnochie, Day, Nolan & Wharton, 2008) which suggested that a first-year subject which focused solely on pre and post invasion Aboriginal culture and history, contemporary issues and the role of psychology would provide a solid foundation. It could then be followed by scaffolded material throughout later years, culminating with a third-year elective subject. This approach became known as the UniSA model as it originated at the University of South Australia (Ranzijn, McConnochie, Nolan & Day, 2007). The original first-year subject was based on this model.

The subject was taught conjointly by the Schools of Indigenous Australian Studies (SIAS) and Psychology. The former presented and assessed the Indigenous foundational material in the first six weeks and the latter the relevant psychology and professional development content in the final six. The subject was taught online and consisted of 12 topics, supported by live, weekly online sessions and a discussion board. A good working relationship between the two Schools and the convenors meant that problems and divisions between the first and second half of the subject were mostly avoided. It was first taught in 2009 and for the first five years the convenor from SIAS was from Kamilaroi. When this person retired, Simone took her place. This change appeared to be seamless but it meant that now the subject was being taught by two non-aboriginal academics (Simone and Jillene).

Evidence from annual student evaluations and student performance suggested that overall the subject was successful at achieving its aims. Responses to mandatory questions and voluntary open-ended comments were mostly positive. The averages of these evaluations were the same or better than the School of Psychology average. The distribution of grades was also comparable to the School.

¹This initiative preceded a similar objective by Universities Australia in 2017.

There were a couple of problems which required modifications to be made. Teaching online at times restricted voluntary student participation: some students would discuss material on the discussion board but others didn't engage. Our concern was that, given the emotive nature of some of the content, it was hard to know whether students were distressed. Nor could we gauge their support at these times. It seemed imperative to have some face-to-face classes, but there did not seem to be a clear way to do this as the student cohort was geographically disparate and the subject was a 'distance' subject, which was not intended for face-to-face contact.

A problem of deep concern was that a portion of Aboriginal students reported that they did not like the subject. It's important to realise that this feedback was mostly given anecdotally and seemed to contradict formal evaluations. One of the main reasons students disliked the subject was that Aboriginal culture was being taught by non-aboriginal people using white methods. Thus unintentionally, the subject had fallen into the colonial trap of 'white-fellas telling black-fella history' (Uncle Baribun cf. Okan, in press, p. 15). One student was critical of enrolling in a subject where they knew more about culture than the person teaching. Some of the students commented that the subject assumed that all students were white. This made them feel excluded. It also made it difficult when responding to assessments on white privilege. These students did not like the Western pedagogical framework. As convenors, this was a serious issue for us; one of the main reasons for the subject was to represent First Nations reality and knowledge in a way that was relevant and encouraging for Aboriginal students. Albeit a small number, the feedback from these students indicated that we were failing.

The reason for change however, preceded the feedback from Aboriginal students. Rather, it came about from a heart-felt need. Engagement with the local Wiradyuri Elders and the belief that traditional knowledge holders would teach things in a way that opens minds and engages hearts drove it. From this perspective, the desire to make changes was less about meeting a set of learning outcomes or solving problems and more about giving each student a first-hand experience of the beauty, gentleness and strength of some of the sovereign cultures of our nation, and to open their minds to the idea that Aboriginal methods and knowledge could renew psychology making it more appropriate and relevant for contemporary Australian society. As the sovereign authorities, Elders are the source, and they teach from the heart. We believe that this experience is life-changing for the learner. The idea that Aboriginal pedagogy delivers intangible and holistic changes for learners is becoming well-recognised (Department of Education and Communities, 2012; Yunkaporta, 2009; Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011). Our involvement as non-aboriginal learners in this space has shown us that Elders give an experience that we think is lacking in Western education, and desperately needed. We believe that once they experience this, *all* students are hungry for more.

Reflection—Simone

Teaching into Indigenous Australian studies as a non-indigenous woman has its challenges and these have been compounded with my personal experiences of mental health in my extended Aboriginal and Tongan family. The issues that are taught in this subject have been dealt with either inefficiently or positively within the family, so I have often felt rather than thought and drawn on personal anecdotes to make the connection between readings and what students desperately want to know—what role can they play in ‘fixing’? Yet I now realise that it is more a balance between imparting knowledge, and teaching the students to be agents of change in their profession. Assessing students’ knowledge about what they understand to be cultural aspects is fraught with challenges if, teaching online, you cannot understand or see the cultural identities of the students. The most common feedback has been; ‘why is this subject taught online?’.

Other feedback received from students has been cause for reflection. How do we teach stressful content and then only be available on the other end of the phone? Can we be flexible about their learning pace—when encountering hard facts about treatment of people by racist policies? Issues of identity are raised by students who openly identify online as having Aboriginal heritage.

Knowledge and Scholarship Around the Topic

On the topic of embedding First Nations Australian knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum in psychology it has been argued that a decolonised curriculum is the optimum approach (Castell, Bullen, Garvey & Jones, 2018; Darlaston Jones et al., 2014; Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones, Phillips et al., 2016). A decolonised curriculum is one which challenges the assumptions and narrative of the dominant cultural group (Darlaston Jones et al., 2014). It allows the systemic oppression that leads to First Nations Australian disadvantage to be identified. This is critical for bringing about broad scale societal change. Further, a decolonised approach recognises First Nations Australians as sovereign and their perspectives central to knowledge production.

The curriculum guidelines from a recent project conducted in partnership with the Australian Psychological Society, the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP) argued that in order to recognise Aboriginal perspectives as integral, rather than token or ‘other’, the assumptions and practices of the dominant group must come under scrutiny (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014; Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones, Cranney et al., 2016). Therefore, instead of teaching ‘about’ Aboriginal people, the philosophy and assumptions of all cultures are subject to critical analyses. Importantly, this includes the dominant culture, so that rather than being normative, it is opened to questioning (Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones, Phillips et al., 2016).

Practically, a decolonised approach represents a giant leap; changes to both content and pedagogy of whole courses. To remedy this, the AIPEP curriculum guidelines (Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones, Phillips et al., 2016) provided steps to transition curriculum. However, many Australian psychology courses seem to be steeped in a traditional Western empirical approach and taught by staff who have acquired their expertise from this approach (Dudgeon, Darlaston Jones, Phillips et al., 2016a, b). This then provides the model of pedagogy that they adopt. While decolonising curriculum is a worthy aspiration, it requires deep-seated changes to staff ways of thinking and expertise. This takes time. But, our experience is that contemporary university affords very little time to develop such changes. The culture of the tertiary sector and the pressures of maintaining accreditation and quality standards can make this task seem too hard, especially when it is often not clear how to progress incrementally and still meet the agendas set by deadlines and outcomes.

Conversation with Elders; Mallyan and Wirribee—Jill

Originally, I asked for advice about how to better teach and assess critical reflection. From a white perspective these initial discussions seemed very general and not about critical reflection at all. At times I became impatient. I was also painfully aware of how rude this was. In my defence, I can only say that it was very hard to operate in the time-pressured, outcome-driven environment which is contemporary university culture, while simultaneously having the careful, and deliberate way of considering a topic that is the Elders' way. One of the key challenges as an academic working in this space is to be the buffer between the demands of the institution and the unhurried, thorough and purposeful way of working that the Elders require. There is no right way to do this; being guided by my humanity and 'fighting the good fight' were my starting point.

I was aware from prior experiences with Elders that what seemed like unrelated ideas in fact had deep and sensible connections. It was my white-fella tendency to be a reductionist and my inability to see the big picture at the time that made for the perception of disconnect. I made an explicit decision to ignore the university deadlines. Instead, I decided to slow down. I made a commitment to trust the process, to work with the Elders and learn what I needed to learn. This meant abandoning some of my white-fella ways, one of which was a need for control. Very quickly, following this conscious decision, the collaborative work on the subject began in earnest.

There were many very concentrated immersion sessions where knowledge of culture was shared with trust and willingness. Working together, all aspects of the subject were considered. Coming from a Western education, it was hard to adapt to the Aboriginal tendency to see the big picture first and then to deconstruct this into smaller pieces. The Western approach is often the reverse of this; a linear approach starting with the first step and working to the end. Maybe each approach has its merits. But for each of us it required a big shift in perspective, almost like learning

a new language. Wiradyuri lore, way of living and ways of teaching were explained along with very rich, pragmatic and varied suggestions for teaching different aspects of the subject.

Yindyamarra and Wiradyuri Pedagogy: Wirribee

Two principles formed the basis of initial changes to the subject. Most importantly, they provided very clear guidance on the way of teaching and interacting with the students. The first of these was Yindyamarra which is the Wiradyuri way of living. It means to honour and respect, to go slowly, and to be gentle and polite. The expectation is that while on Country people will abide by lore and behave accordingly. The footprint of the university is in Wiradyuri country. So, Yindyamarra extends to academic staff and students and applies to all aspects of teaching. To honour this, teachers need to *gari yala* (speak the truth) *dhuluyanha* (walk straight), i.e. walk the talk.

The second principle was the pedagogical framework; Yindyamaldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang (Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders) which means respectful learning together. It is the name given to a comprehensive, five-phase framework which takes the learner on a journey from novice to independent.

The intellectual property of this pedagogical framework Yindyamaldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang is owned and copyrighted to Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders, we are the only ones who carry the intellectual knowledge to teach this pedagogical framework.

These knowledges have been passed on to us by our Old People and Ancestors.

The framework came about when yarning about the 8 ways of learning, and it was created because 8 ways didn't suit our Wiradyuri context. The Framework is copyrighted so that any permissions, changes or modifications need to come through Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders. Therefore its use in this context in Psychology is also copyrighted to us.

From a Western perspective, the question is not so much how we teach students about these principles, but how we emulate these principles in our teaching. If we are behaving according to Yindyamarra, pedagogy follows. For example, respect is two way and starts by teachers demonstrating respect and care for students. Being gentle and going slowly means for example, providing the time and space to learn and to understand the concepts, and giving due time to answer questions. Yindyamaldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang (Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders) provides the necessary space for students to make mistakes and then learn from these. According to this framework it is expected that mistakes are part of normal learning and not a reason to fail. Importantly, teachers walk the learning journey alongside their students and support them until they reach independence.

Critical Reflexivity

There is strong evidence indicating that to work effectively professionals from the dominant culture need to become aware of and question the foundations, beliefs and values of their culture and themselves. This reduces the risk of further oppressing First Nations people (Dudgeon, Harris et al., 2016a, b; Ranzijn et al., 2008). Ranzijn, et al.'s (2008) curriculum guidelines were informed by interviews with Aboriginal people who regarded psychology as a white profession that had little to offer (Ranzijn et al., 2007a, b). This was further supported in the AIPEP workforce guidelines (Dudgeon, Harris et al., 2016a, b) which were based on interviews with psychologists and other mental health professionals who worked with Aboriginal clients. Dudgeon, Harris et al., (2016a, b), reported that the majority of psychology students were from a white middle-class background and that awareness of their privilege and culture was needed to work effectively with Aboriginal people. The interviews indicated that many graduates did not have this awareness.

The essence of critical reflexivity is turning the gaze inward to inspect our own culture. For many non-aboriginal psychology students, their culture is invisible. As a consequence, being required to identify and inspect their culture and the associated beliefs and values is both novel and challenging. Many have not previously been asked to think about or describe these things.

Simple Ways to Encourage Reflection: Mallyan

The starting point for many (white) students is that the gaze is outward. The gaze needs to be turned inward. This is uncomfortable for them, so they need to learn to sit with the discomfort. They need to consider their own world views, assumptions, beliefs and how these are formed intergenerationally. It's a matter of meeting students where they are, i.e. tailoring learning to their starting point. We can do this by asking some simple questions. This gets them where they are at.

It is crucial to engage students' humanity. This starts with the realisation that we are all people, and regardless of culture, we can find things that we have in common. Empathy, the ability to take on another person's perspective and imagine what they are feeling (Rogers, 1975) is required to form meaningful connections and engage with people in a healing relationship. Psychology has identified three kinds of empathy; cognitive, emotional and compassionate (Goleman, 1995). To have empathy, we need to reflect on our own feelings in our interactions with a client and consider the impact of what we are doing on that person. Sometimes simple and gentle exercises such as slowing down to look at a face and consider the feelings being portrayed and the feelings that it brings up in us can be effective. This engages both emotional and compassionate empathy. A gentle and empathetic approach by the teacher can also assist, by modelling this for the student. As we are encouraging students to expose

their vulnerability, it is important not to abuse their trust. This became important in assessing critical reflection.

Assessment

Feedback from students suggests that Western teaching practices can be culturally unsafe for many learners, both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal. This includes assessment. We maintain that the ways that traditional Western pedagogy assesses what is learned is not always conducive to learning that aims to develop deep knowledge and reflective practices. Failure to acknowledge and address the characteristics which actually inhibit learning then limits the potential of students.

From our combined teaching perspectives, it could be argued that Western assessment tends to be deficit rather than strength-focused. What is wrong or missing from a piece of work is often given more weight than what is correct. While this reflects a tradition that aims to achieve excellence through challenge and critique, we argue, it does not empower or encourage students. It is not a gentle or slow approach and does not respect or honour the learner. Further, student evaluations reflect that contemporary students have difficulty learning from this kind of assessment.

We have found that the time-limited nature of assessment tends to reward instant, uncomplicated results. A deadline without options to resubmit tends to circumvent a full understanding. Instead, to survive, students shortcut a full understanding rather than committing to a personal journey and individual development. A consequence can be inauthentic responses from students such as writing what they think is required in order to pass, rather than writing what they really think and testing out their ideas. Poignantly, feedback from one student suggested that this was an approach they adopted in order to pass.

Despite these shortcomings, there is a formal educational requirement to assess. Most often this is summative. But, valid assessment can be formative, providing feedback about the acquisition of concepts and knowledge to students, as well as feedback for instructors about the effectiveness of their teaching. As teachers, the question is how to assess in a meaningful way to ensure that students have obtained the fundamentals and to also provide feedback in a way that is not punitive or judgmental and encourages exploration, mistakes and personal growth? In this space it is also part of trying to create a safe learning environment so that we don't automatically shut down the students' genuine emotional responses (i.e., close their hearts).

Applying Gari Yala and Dhuluyanha to Assessment: Wirribee

Together, we considered a better way to design and assess activities. A process with cultural integrity will be able to identify when information has been transformed to personal knowledge. This assesses the student as knowledge creator and as an active learner. It also recognises that learning evolves slowly over time. Yindyamarra provides some guiding principles for assessment. One of these is the need to go slowly and be gentle. In assessment this meant recognising that students will take time to learn the material in a meaningful and lasting way. It also means to go gently when marking. In essence, assessment needs to be formative, forgiving and encouraging of the journey. There were times when, what seemed like a very good assessment for critical reflection was not used because the rules for the subject dictated that it had to be graded and grading this kind of work was not in keeping with Yindyamarra. In order to gari yala and dhuluyanha we had to consider other ways to assess.

In practical terms this meant providing the time for students to submit work and receive feedback. This was difficult because of large class sizes. A first step was to set up some very basic tests of knowledge which provided immediate feedback and then give the students the opportunity to revisit and resubmit.

Another change to assessment came from Yindyamalldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang (Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders). If staff and students are engaged in respectful learning together, then students cannot fail. Instead, the learning journey is continued until independence is obtained. An interim step towards achieving this was to remove fail grades from the marking rubrics and replace them with 'have not achieved sufficient learning at this time'. This may seem a very minor difference. But, it represented a significant change in the way that we thought about assessment. A further progression in this approach is to reduce the number of assignments, and instead work towards one assessment which is scaffolded; made up of multiple parts, where students receive feedback and are then enabled to rework these segments into the final whole.

A final principle of assessment was adopted from Yunkaporta's pedagogical framework whereby knowledge is assessed by its usefulness to community. 'Students and teachers need to be constantly asking: What does this knowledge mean for me and my community and how can I use it for local benefit?' (Yunkaporta, as cited in Department of Education & Communities, 2012, p. 15). From this perspective learning has important community obligations and as teachers we need to assess from the position of what the student is expected to do with this knowledge. In our case this was to work inclusively and collaboratively with First Nations people. In adopting this approach, assessment became much more practical, centred on imagining work and knowing what to do.

We used *Cassie's Story: Dyan Ngal*, an online digital narrative given by a young Aboriginal woman (CSU, 2011) to set the framework. It is based on a contemporary case study presented by Associate Professor Wendy Nolan in staff cultural competency training sessions. Cassie's narrative is about the situation in a local NSW town

and the experience of forced removal of her community from their homes. There is a clear continuity between past practice and policy and the contemporary experiences of Cassie and her community; issues such as forced removals and evictions still continue (Hill et al., 2016). In the first-year assessment, students are asked to imagine they will be working with Cassie.

Student Voices: Simone

The use of Cassie's Story is consistent with Yunkaporta's (2009) assertion that the 8 Ways pedagogy can work by incorporating Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning—in this case, a narrative. Using this allows students to relate on a more personal level. Feedback included comments such as 'I really did learn a lot about myself and the way I view others'. Reflective writing also allows students to explore themselves and their knowledge, skills and attitudes, forming the basis for ongoing cultural competency.

Working Effectively

A topic at the end of the subject was about working effectively. The modification to this lesson probably best exemplifies the way that teaching collaboratively, under the guidance of Mallyan and Wirribee, brought real-world relevance to the subject. Previously, the topic had content based on the latest research. But it lacked pragmatic know-how. For example, a lot has been written about working effectively (e.g. Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, 2000; Dudgeon, Milroy & Walker, 2012; Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker, 2010). However, there are few guidelines about ways to navigate in new country in order to find the people with cultural knowledge and how to engage. It is recognised that when new to a community, a psychologist needs to become known (Crawford, Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, 2010; Garvey, 2008). The problem is finding the people you need to talk to. Anecdotally we know that this limits many graduates who go to remote communities and do not have this knowledge. Ultimately, it means that they are a lost resource to the community until they work out who to talk to and how to engage.

Mallyan created a simple flow chart for finding the right people and engaging with them to provide a straight forward, pragmatic guide. The method of culturally safe engagement with clients was illustrated in a recorded interview with Kelly Hyde, who is an Aboriginal mental health worker with a psychology degree. These authentic additions to the topics gave real value. They provided concrete ideas for students on how to work effectively, so that when they enter the workplace they know where to start.

Conclusion

Wiradyuri Elders, Mallyan and Wirribee have many strategies for teaching in this space. This chapter demonstrates that these evolved once collaboration on the design and teaching of the subject commenced. With the benefit of hindsight, the Wiradyuri way of living and pedagogical framework has become an alternative way to achieve a decolonised approach.

Teaching provides the model of demonstrating multiple perspectives, which ultimately leads to questioning the dominant view (Yunkaporta, 2009). Further, it has been argued that through teaching and deep learning, common ground and reconciliation between perspectives is achievable (Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009). Importantly, in the current case, it provides the opportunity for non-aboriginal academics to learn, develop and change. Rather than being inauthentic experts, academics become learners in this process and are taught by the Elders alongside their students. This Yindyamaldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang (Gunhigal Mayiny Wiradyuri Dyilang Elders) models the curious and open attitude for students that is necessary to learn about culture. It also redefines the hierarchical teacher/student relationship to become more equal, respectful and empathic. These relationships make learning more culturally safe for all learners, but especially for Aboriginal students.

It is important to recognise that while the subject takes a decolonised approach, at the time of writing, overall the School of Psychology did not. This may seem incoherent. But, we believe that there are still merits. It is anticipated that students will enjoy the benefits of this approach to learning and that it will be more meaningful. A taste of this experience will lead them to look for other areas of enquiry that use this approach, and will lead to questioning the traditional approach to teaching psychology. It could be argued that this in itself is change agency in action.

The Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020 requires that Australian First Nations perspectives and knowledge are embedded in university courses in all disciplines (Universities Australia, 2017). As a consequence, it is anticipated that many Schools of Psychology are currently trying to incorporate content into contemporary courses, but for the reasons outlined earlier, cannot simply dispense with the Western approach to existing curriculum and start again. Rather than seeing the task as all too daunting, this chapter provides some examples for modifying an existing subject. This may create opportunities for further developments elsewhere. Importantly, with collaborative partnerships, change can evolve slowly as relationships between First Nations Australian knowledge holders and academic staff are strengthened through trust and mutual goals. We also should not overlook the influence that modelling these partnerships has on students (W. Nolan, personal communication, January 17, 2009). Indeed, this may be as significant as the content in providing concrete examples of how to work collaboratively.

As a result of abandoning the Western agenda of deadlines and outcomes, modifications to the subject were still evolving at the time that this chapter was written. Because it is a work in progress, we have chosen to illustrate the way in which some of what was learnt was incorporated into the subject. This collaborative work

is ongoing. We are currently planning to team-teach the subject and working through the way to do this across campuses or online. The big picture is still emerging, and we wait with eager anticipation to see the effect on students.

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