Chapter 9
Practicing What We Preach: Reflecting on Culturally Competent Practice in the Teaching of Indigenous Australian Content

Linda Ghys and Simone Gray

Abstract Over the last few decades, teaching the skills required for providing culturally competent practice has become the mainstay across many disciplines. This means that for those responsible for teaching these skills, critical reflection on our own competencies is paramount. Critical reflection asks us to think about our teaching practice and the ideas we have about it. It then challenges us to take a step back and consider our thinking through a series of questions related to the reflective act. This means not only looking at the past and the present, but considering the future and acting accordingly. The complexities of this are increased when teaching outside of a culture that is not our own. In this chapter, we critically reflect on our own positions as non-Indigenous women teaching Indigenous content to students from a variety of disciplines. We also consider what this means from our own perspectives of becoming culturally competent and maintaining culturally competent practice.

Introduction—Who We Are and What We Do

Linda's Story

I am a non-Indigenous woman. I am a first-generation migrant whose cultural background is European. I am a graduate of the former David Unaipon College of Education and Research (DUCIER), a college that was positioned with the University of South Australia (UNISA). In 2005, I was invited to mark and then tutor in some of the subjects that formed the BA (Indigenous Studies). During my time teaching at UNISA, I was fortunate to be working with Indigenous Australian lecturers to deliver subjects that focused on Australia's shared history since colonisation. I was

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conscious that much of the content being delivered was not based on my own experiences of colonisation, but those of my colleagues. It became clear to me that I was in a position that afforded me many privileges due to my whiteness and I became aware that I needed to reflect on how this might impact on how and what I was teaching. Some of the questions that came to mind following my reflections include, in what ways am I representing Indigenous Australians and whose knowledge am I using to do so? Indeed, should I be doing so? Am I, as Moreton-Robinson (2004) suggests, complicit in embodying the 'Indigenous Other' as a function, in this case as the 'object' within a subject that I teach from a position of white privilege, and the inherent power that accompanies this position?

And importantly, had I even acknowledged my own whiteness? In 2012, I relocated to Dubbo to take up a continuing position with Charles Sturt University at the former Centre for Indigenous Studies (now the School of Indigenous Australian Studies). Today, while I continue to reflect on these questions, it is now within the context of Yindyamarra Winhanganha.[1]

Simone's Story

I am a non-Indigenous woman whose heritage is European. There are gaps in my family history as is the case with many people. I have two adult children who both identify with their father's Aboriginal family and share his last name. My family experiences and interest in education led to me working in a school with a high percentage of Aboriginal children many of whom were living disrupted lives. I used my academic skills to tutor and then became employed by the (then) Centre for Indigenous Studies (CIS) at the Dubbo campus of CSU. I have taught from the perspective of localised knowledge and personal experience, conscious of the fact that I am teaching around my own family's culture. I feel honoured that I am supported in my role by extended family and respected Uncles and Aunts. I am highly conscious of issues of identity and as such am forever conscious of my whiteness. I seek to position myself as 'human' in my interactions with people and as such have become increasingly focused on the perpetuity of the concept of 'race' being used to divide people and societies. I am also aware working within a white institution and its structures and processes that require student learning about Indigenous Australia, that students will have to be prepared to build on their learning over time, rather than in one 'fix' and this approach has been endorsed by the concept of Yindyamarra Winhanganha.

[1] Yindyamarra Winhanganha was taken from the Wiradyuri language. Yindyamarra is the Wiradyuri way of living. It means to honour and respect, to go slowly, and to be gentle and polite. Yindyamarra Winhanganha gifted to Charles Sturt University from Wiradyuri Traditional Owners and has been translated as "The wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live in a world worth living in". It has become an ethos of the University.

What We Do

As non-Indigenous academics teaching in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, we work with large numbers of students from a variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Our teaching is predominantly undertaken online. The overall commonality in the content of the subjects that we write and teach is culturally competent practice. Cultural competency can be a difficult concept to define. It is an ongoing process of reflection, action and practice rather than a one-off skill. While the educational space is, as Ayers (2009, in Kawai, Serriere & Mitra, 2014, p. 489) notes, 'a contested space, a natural site of conflict—sometimes restrained, other times full of eruption—over questions of justice', our teaching of Indigenous content and shared histories is more conflicted than most. What this means for us as non-Indigenous academics is that we must continually think about our work as lecturers in this space. We must also identify any areas of concern—for example, as non-Indigenous women teaching Indigenous studies, we might reflect on how what we are teaching and how we are teaching it impacts on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (reflection), we may follow this reflection with discussions with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues or find some information about teaching from this perspective (action), and then put that research into action through our teaching practice or by reworking the subjects we teach (practice). This is a process that can be applied across all professions, not just teaching.

It is also important to note that Indigenous Australian cultural competency is about more than the individual: it is also systemic or institutional. For example, the fact that Charles Sturt University requires all students to undertake an Indigenous Australian studies subject as part of their degree is an example of systemic cultural competency. Added to this, up until recently, all Indigenous Knowledges and Cultures (IKC) subjects were only available as online subjects. Teaching online means the students can seem 'faceless' and we cannot assume their cultural identity, experiences or knowledge of Indigenous Australians' histories and experiences. The fact that many people still say that they have never met an Aboriginal person or lived in communities with Aboriginal people is a usual starting point. How do we effectively point out that there are reasons for that invisibility? How can we use this to 'teach' cultural competency? And of further importance, how do we ensure that our own practice is culturally competent?

When we consider our own positions of white privilege and the inherent power we hold as academics in this space, we concur with Lampert (2003, p. 2), who suggests that '[our] academic qualifications are written on [our] white bod[ies]—plain in the colour of [our] skin, which grants [us] authority before[we] open [our] mouth[s]'. What this means to us is that when teaching and writing about the experiences of cultures from outside of our own, there is an inherent responsibility to 'get it right'. One way to do this is to ensure that we continually reflect on what we do and how we are doing it. In fact, as we will reiterate in this chapter, continual reflection is paramount in maintaining our own cultural competence and therefore, culturally competent teaching practice. As an example of a way of thinking about this, we now

turn to one of the subjects that we co-taught in 2017, Indigenous Cultures, Histories and Contemporary Realities (IKC101).

Teaching Indigenous Studies

IKC101 is an analysis of Australia's shared history which provides students with an understanding of the impacts of colonisation. It was first taught in 2010 by the then Centre for Indigenous Studies (CIS). The first iteration of the subject was written by three Indigenous academics in consultation with community members. Originally designed for education students, academics from CIS consulted with community members on the topics deemed necessary for an understanding of the historical and political impacts of colonisation and how these have implications for Indigenous Australians today. The purpose of the subject was to give future teachers both an understanding of potential issues that might arise in the classroom and an empathy towards students who may be impacted on because of this. Such an understanding is a crucial component in the development of individual cultural competency. Many students, while having some understanding, attain a more in-depth knowledge of this shared history while undertaking IKC101 and this can be confronting at times. The subject uses many historical documents and some of them can be quite harsh in their representations of Indigenous Australian people. Further, it can be very difficult to have long held beliefs challenged. Students are required to reflect on what they have learned, personally act on the information and take it into their future professional practice. A new version of the subject was introduced in 2018 and is now delivered to multiple disciplines with a focus on positioning the self within society and culture and requires students to consider their own world view in terms of competency. This means that the subject should be the beginning of a lifetime of professional and personal competencies based on an understanding of the concepts of race, privilege and knowledge. Here we might begin to consider that to achieve this, we must move from simply reflecting critically, to applying our practice reflexively as we seek ways to maintain our professional and individual cultural competency. The role of reflexivity is an idea to which we will return later in the chapter.

In terms of teaching these concepts, an understanding of our own white privilege is paramount when as non-Indigenous academics, we are teaching the cultures, histories and realities of Indigenous Australian people from our own perspectives and positions of whiteness. Similarly, as noted above, an acknowledgement or understanding by students that their own positions in society contribute to the uneven powers that exist in Australia is required to promote cultural competency. However, while most students can grasp the idea of institutional privilege or racism, many students do not have sufficient understanding of the concept of white privilege as it applies to themselves, and so reject the notion that they are 'privileged' at all (Schick, 2000; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Hollinsworth (2014, p. 2) suggests that exposing 'students to the concept of white privilege can enable students to see themselves as "raced" and encourage anti-racism…'.

Once students understand the concept of whiteness, they may come to realise that '[t]he power relations inherent in the relationship between representations, whiteness and knowledge production are embedded in our identities. They influence research, communication and our everyday lives' (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. 87). Having these understandings is an important component of cultural competency, however, a question remains. If we are successful in imparting this knowledge, will the students who come to position themselves as 'white' be able to critique what they are learning through an understanding of how whiteness informs the space from which this learning comes? Another important consideration is understanding how Indigenous students might respond to concepts of whiteness. It is difficult for us to know whether students are Indigenous or not unless they choose to disclose their identity. However, an understanding of whiteness seems to elicit a sense of empowerment and safety. By this we mean that for those who do, the very disclosing of their Indigeneity to us would seem to indicate such feelings. Lickona (1999) believes that teachers should serve as role models who are respectful and caring of others; create a safe community atmosphere to foster respect; and hold high academic standards 'in order to teach the value of work as a way to develop oneself and contribute to a community' (Marsh, 2004, p. 333). To ensure that we model this, it is necessary therefore to continue to reflect on our own cultural competency and how this is further reflected in our teaching of it.

The Art of Reflection

So far in this chapter we have continually declared that reflection and reflecting are important for culturally competent practice, but what does this mean in reality and how do we approach it as academics who teach in this space? Reflection happens through writing, thinking and conversation. It is often cyclical, circling around experiences, reflections and conclusions, towards a plan of action and back again. Dewey (1996) suggests that reflection should aim to solve a problem, while Moon (2004) refers to reflection as thinking about the thoughts and processes that occur on a day-to-day basis. In other words, the art of reflection is based on the practice of thinking about our experiences and attitudes, our reactions and responses to those experiences and how we respond to this. For example, in our context this could relate to thinking about a particular teaching moment that was not successful and examining what could be done to improve it. Reflection allows us to examine these reactions and find ways to move forward. Moon (2004) further notes, it is also through this process of thinking and reflecting that we continue to learn. However, for this to be of any value, it must be evaluated against similar thoughts and processes that occurred in the past. When we are able to do this, our teaching becomes more than just reflective, it becomes critically reflexive.

As Glassick, Huber, Maerhoff and Boyer (1997) assert, critically reflective teaching is more than just thinking about the way in which one teaches, it is accepting that teaching is a scholarly action. The idea of critical reflection is premised on the

three intellectual traditions of critical pedagogy, reflective practice and adult learning and education. Brookfield (1995), who builds on Ernest Boyer's (1990) earlier work on the scholarship of teaching, suggests that the process of critical reflection 'happens when teachers discover and examine assumptions of teaching practice by viewing their own practice' (p. xiii). However, although individually reflecting on our own teaching practice contributes to maintaining cultural competency, Brookfield (1995) further insists that the worth of reflection becomes more apparent 'only when others are involved' (p. 140). Hargreaves and Page (2013) agree, suggesting that reflection should also be a collective practice. This is important, as different perspectives can offer different viewpoints about the same issue. In coming together and thinking and talking about our teaching experiences collectively, our perspectives and knowledge are broadened. And so, while it is clear that critically reflective practice is paramount to maintaining cultural competency in our teaching, what should we reflect on? What we might also consider here is whether we have moved from critical reflection to reflexive practice and if so, what might be the difference?

As a starting point, it is necessary to explain what we mean when we talk about critical reflection and reflexivity. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, for us, reflection begins with an act of writing, thinking or conversation, and it is when we think, share, and focus more deeply on these acts, that our reflection becomes critical. Once we identify critical insights and begin to act on them, our practice then becomes reflexive. Bolton (2010) defines reflexivity as the creation of:

> social or professional structures counter to our own values (destructive of diversity, and institutionalising power imbalance for example). It is becoming aware of the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational practices and why such practices might marginalise groups or exclude individuals. And it is understanding how we relate with others, and between us shape organisational realities' shared practices and ways of talking. Thus, we recognise we are active in shaping our surroundings, and begin critically to take circumstances and relationships into consideration rather than merely reacting to them, and help review and revise ethical ways of being and relating (p. 14).

In her discussions on research methodologies, Ruth Nicholls (2009) identifies three layers of reflexivity that align with Bolton's (2010) ideas. The first of these layers is self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity asks us to identify any hidden assumptions. As teachers, this may mean reflecting on how teaching from our position and perspectives of power and privilege sees us delivering a shared history. For example, whose voices and perspectives are prominent in our subject content? Nicholls' (2009) second layer of interpersonal reflexivity means reflecting on how we collaborate with others. In our case, this means discussions with colleagues and students, especially those who choose to identify as Indigenous Australian people. The third layer, collective reflexivity, relates to local and lived knowledge which we can apply as an extension of the first two layers. What this means for us is that we must continue to reflect on any impact that our teaching might have on the community. For example, we need to identify what we might not know, if indeed we have the right to know and if so, how does our position and perspectives further impact on what we teach and how we teach. Once we understand this, we can begin to become culturally competent professionals, and work towards maintaining culturally competent practice.

Cultural Competency—Reflection in Action

As a way of understanding the connections between reflection and its value in maintaining our cultural competency, we turn to Ranzijn, McConnochie, and Nolan (2009) who provide a pedagogical matrix that suggests how cultural competency might be developed and sustained. This is shown in Fig. 9.1. While the matrix was initially designed for psychology students, its usefulness for teachers of cultural competency cannot be overlooked. This is especially important in our position because as Ranzijn et al. (2009) explain, we have a responsibility to reflect on and understand our own culture and cultural position and perspectives before we can understand, and in our case, teach the cultural perspectives and experiences of others. It is critical to note that the matrix is not a static or linear progression towards cultural competency, as Fig. 9.1 might suggest, but rather is a dynamic framework, relying on continual reflection to repeatedly reposition ourselves within it.

As we have reiterated in this chapter, we are non-Indigenous women teaching the shared histories and experiences of Indigenous Australian peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Therefore, our own starting point in the maintenance of culturally competent practice is to critically reflect on our own cultures, cultural positions and cultural identities, and understanding how this might impact on our work. This is not only important for our own teaching practice, but as we have also noted above, it is important because it is also what we ask of our students.

In our teaching of a shared history, it is necessary to impart to students that cultural competency is more than merely the learning and understanding of cultural practices, but also takes in to account the shared experiences of colonisation and its impacts and how this then impacts on the individual and professional lives of

	Cultural Incompetence	Cultural knowledge	Cultural awareness	Cultural sensitivity	Cultural Competence	Cultural Proficiency
Professionally specific skills						
Generic skills						
Critically examining the profession						
Individual values and attitudes						
Understanding Indigenous cultures and histories						
Generic understanding of culture						

Fig. 9.1 Development of Cultural Competence (Ranzijn, Egege, & McDermott, 2008, as cited in Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 9)

the students themselves. In our own case, for example, this means that we must be aware that cultural knowledge such as 'ceremonial life, sacred symbolism; ritual; mystic language; sacred stories; languages; spirituality; information about sacred artefacts; men's business; women's business' should only be taught by Indigenous people (Craven, 1999, p. 240). However, this is often what the students are expecting to learn in these subjects. As a way to address this, Craven stresses the importance of facilitation to enable students to understand the purpose of their learning; to appreciate the process of that learning; and that their individual path is open-ended: there is more than one path to understand (p. 235). Inadvertently she pre-empts the cultural competence framework by stating that 'the relationship between student, content, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values is constantly changing' (p. 235).

Knowledge, Skills and Values—Knowing and Valuing Our Students

Knowledge includes knowing our student cohort as well as our content (Perso, 2012). Due to large cohorts and the subject being predominantly online, this can be difficult. Each session, a new student cohort brings a different set of challenges. Student cohorts include Indigenous, non-Indigenous and international students with different levels of knowledge about Australia's shared history. This means that what worked last time, might not work this time.

Depending on the student's own cultural background, there can be guilt, anger, shame, distress or disbelief about the content. This means that we need to apply certain skills to defuse this guilt while at the same time, maintaining safe spaces for discussion. Perso (2012) suggests that validation of student's cultures and experiences is an important part of culturally competent practice. By sharing our own cultural backgrounds and experiences with honesty and respect for students' experiences, we can encourage students to do the same, inviting respectful curiosity and working towards countering misinformation. This is important in our context because as Best (cf. Best & Fredericks, 2017) notes:

> [m]any misconceptions continue to inform widespread beliefs, values and attitudes about Indigenous Australians. These beliefs, values and attitudes are formed in early childhood and can be influenced by many different mechanisms, such as family, class, ethnicity, religion, schooling and social media (p. 50).

Our experiences of teaching the subject to not only such a diverse student cohort, but also across two different subject cohorts at the same time brought a different set of challenges. These challenges meant reflecting once again on who we are in our teaching of this subject and reconsidering how the student's own cultural identities and experiences might impact on their knowledge of a shared Australian history based on how we taught it.

Teaching our shared history from our worldviews as non-Indigenous women is at times a risky business. Having said this, Cooper, He, and Levin (2011) suggest

that taking risks is a necessary component when teaching diverse cohorts. We would add that teaching from a position of diversity adds to not only the risks but also the responsibility. While Cooper et al. (2011) further suggest 'stepping in' to the homes and communities of such students, this is not an option for us as online educators. However, there is a way in which we can invite the students into our lives instead. One example of this for IKC101 was based on a successful idea that Simone had trialled previously; the use of short YouTube video clips to deliver key points from the content, and additionally, to make an extra social connection with the students. We reflected on the success of this and thought about how we could apply it to two separate cohorts. Following our reflection and discussion, we decided to record short clips to provide information and advice about each assessment task. In keeping with the notion of inviting students into our lives, the clips were recorded from a variety of locations, including the Dubbo campus and Linda's home. Largely unscripted and using a blend of humour, honesty and sincerity to provide the information, the clips were recorded on an iPad and uploaded onto YouTube. One of the aims of these clips was to become more approachable to students and in return for inviting students into our lives, it was hoped that we would be invited into theirs and so validate them as Perso (2012) suggests. In sharing our lives with our students, and they sharing theirs with us, the balance between the learner and the teacher can become more level, promoting a respectful relationship and therefore, students feel more confident to ask questions (Chabeli, 2008). In the teaching of a shared history, this is important in helping to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions that have been perpetrated in the past and to some extent, the present.

Returning, Reflecting, Responding

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked the question 'how do we maintain cultural competency within our own teaching practice'? In response to this question we have discussed the need to critically reflect on our own cultures, cultural positions and cultural identities as we ask our students to do: role modelling for first-year students is essential. The feedback from students, peers and other colleagues creates a loop that is somewhat endless as new students enter the academy, are taught the same information and due to their cultural backgrounds and understandings, bring new interpretations of cultural competence. Thus, our teaching shifts to cater for new understandings. This then impacts on our teaching practice, further informs reflection and we move on to another cohort, modifying our content, approaches and teaching practice. The principle of Yindyamarra Winhanganha guides us as we aim to improve our teaching to allow us to create students who appreciate 'the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in'. If teaching is not to try to improve the world, what is it eventually to achieve? Keeping up to date with Indigenous Australian issues and communities is also a part of culturally competent practice to enable us to mediate student's understandings of differing Indigenous Australian contexts. Ideally, we as teachers can aid students to self-evaluate their

understandings of the dominant cultural matrix and how this informs their personal and professional practice. It is an ongoing process that we are responsible for igniting in our students. Just as the Dreaming is non-linear, so too is the process of Indigenous Australian cultural competence.

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