

Transcript with references for Podcast 1: Discussing the benefits of an Indigenist approach to learning and teaching.

Welcome to my first podcast which is part 1 of a 2 part series of oral works that cap off the series of published works that make up the bulk of the content in my PhD research study.

This podcast will be focussed on highlighting the potential of an Indigenist approach to learning and teaching within a university context, and in particular in the delivery of social work practitioner education.

This discussion is informed by the research findings of my PhD study which presents evidence of a shared way of thinking about and approaching Indigenous learning and teaching practice across a broad First Nations cultural landscape in Australia.

Based on previous and current policies, most of the activity in Australian universities that's focused on First Nations inclusion, is limited to three main criteria, the inclusion of First Nations students, the inclusion of First Nations staff, and the inclusion of Indigenous content and perhaps Indigenous perspectives, in a limited context.

What doesn't seem to get discussed or actioned from a policy perspective is the inclusion of Indigenous or Indigenist approaches to the design of curriculum and the management, delivery, and Indigenist evaluation of the learning and teaching experience. Even within the Indigenous studies and Indigenous knowledges discipline spaces, this is not typically happening (Townsend-Cross, 2021).

In this podcast I would like to discuss how universities can operationalise their commitments to Indigenous inclusion in ways that shift the process from a paternalistic welfare-based approach to a rights-based approach, in concert with international standards and expectations.

By way of example, I'll focus on a student-centred approach and how an Indigenist approach to learning and teaching can provide rich and meaningful experiences for university students, above and beyond the typical mainstream Anglocentric learning outcomes, and in ways that will support socially just and decolonising approaches to professional practice into the future.

For the past ten years I've been teaching into undergraduate and postgraduate social work qualification programs, so I'll talk specifically about this space but I'm also able to reflect on my extensive academic teaching experience prior to this, where I was able to facilitate Indigenous and Indigenist learning and teaching experiences more comprehensively, although not without challenge and resistance from within the academy.

The education of social workers is a particularly relevant example to use given the social work professions commitments to human rights and social justice at the national level through the Australian Association of Social Workers and at the international level via the International Federation of Social Workers.

These commitments include specific references to social justice, cultural justice and human rights for Indigenous peoples. Commitment to supporting social justice for First nations peoples in Australia was formalised by the AASW via an apology that recognised that, for generations, social work had been involved in unjust, patronising and racist practises towards First Nations communities and families (Mendes and Fejo, 2014).

In a contemporary context Australia social workers are often working in response to critical community, family and individual support needs, and within these spaces there is, without exception a glaring over representation of First Nations peoples.

With less than 1% of professional social workers being First Nations people, most of the social workers who engage with First Nations peoples, facing challenging and often traumatic circumstances, will be non-Indigenous.

The AASW requires social workers to have a working knowledge and understanding of their clients social and cultural attachments (AASW, 2020). This requirement represents a significant challenge for the educators of social workers in providing a learning experience that develop knowledge and understanding rather than just provide information. It's a lot more sophisticated than just having relevant content.

Given the increasing demand for social workers in Australia, it will never be a realistic or perhaps even rational solution to just focus on increasing the number of First Nations people becoming social workers. There is simply not enough First Nations people available to fill that need.

And even if there were, we are failing to understand the difference between social and cultural connection and understanding and homogenised racial categorisation and assumptions of sameness.

What's more, even when racially defined representation percentages are increased, we don't tend to see significant changes in outcomes. There are numerous examples of health and education services that are wholly staffed by First Nations practitioners, yet the life outcomes for the First Nations service users and their communities does not significantly improve. Does it really matter who operationalises the system if the system itself is the problem?

So why do we persist with policies and practices that are clearly not producing better outcomes in any significant way? From my perspective, and as the slogan on the tshirt says, "because racism".

I'll come back to this, but for now I want to talk about how taking an Indigenist approach to the teaching of social work students might look and what positive impact this might have in the immediate and longer term.

I think it's important to make clear that this discussion is not just about how First Nations teachers and scholars should work with First Nations students, to support First Nations students to successfully complete their university studies and graduate.

That objective is definitely an important part of an Indigenist approach, however, if we limit the Indigenist approach to this we fall back into the trap of First Nations knowledges being culturally siloed and marginalised, which is a contradiction to an Indigenist approach.

Reflecting back on the findings of my research, the overarching principles identified are based on inclusivity of the human and non-human and growing relationships and maintaining relationships across that entire space.

The bigger picture is that an Indigenist approach provides an opportunity for all students in a program to have a learning experience that enables them to develop a far deeper understanding of the underlying philosophies, beliefs, values and practices that have been developed and maintained by First Nations peoples to live in healthy sustainable ways for hundreds of generations.

From a social work perspective this is an ideal big picture outcome. From a learning and teaching perspective this is a profoundly different approach to simply including Indigenous content.

Another critical point to make here, is that from a teaching perspective, an Indigenist approach can and should include people who are not Indigenous based on their ancestry, race or ethnicity. Given how profoundly racialised the hegemonic societies and systems are, that most of us currently have to live in, I have no doubt that this point will challenge a lot of people.

The powerful social constructs of race and the expectation that most of us within racialised societies will comply with the racial contract, as defined and discussed by Jamaican- American philosopher Charles Mills, should not be underestimated in regard to how hard it might be to just imagine a non-racialized society, and how the role's we currently play in challenging or defending racially defined cultural norms, need not exist.

Yet the alternative reality is right here, via Indigenous world views and the cultural norms that reflect those views. Alternatives to race-based thinking are available. Indigenist learning and teaching practices and experiences are a conduit to understanding this.

The point that Indigenist practices, as informed by Indigenous paradigms, must be available as a practice option, to non-Indigenous people was articulated in literature by Aboriginal Canadian scholar, Dr Shawn Wilson, in the context of discussing approaches to research. I'm going to quote Dr Wislon here:

"An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational, is shared with all creation, and therefore cannot be owned or discovered. Indigenous research methods should reflect these beliefs and the obligations they imply"

"I use Indigenist to name or label the paradigm that I am talking about rather than Indigenous. It is my belief that an Indigenist paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets. It cannot and should not be claimed to belong only to people with "Aboriginal" heritage. To use an analogy, one does not need to be female to be a feminist. Researchers do not have to be Indigenous to use an Indigenist paradigm, just as researchers do not have to be "white" to use a Western paradigm." (Wilson, 2007).

The final overarching point I want to make before I get into the finer detail of applied Indigenist learning and teaching practice, is that an Indigenist approach is not confined to only considering and working with Indigenous specific content.

The premise that a learning and teaching process is not determined or limited by specific content would seem to a given when we consider that a western learning and teaching processes are applied to the delivery of all content, across all disciplines, courses and programs within Australian universities.

However we need to be mindful that every time we discuss Indigenous and Indigenist practice within colonised, Eurocentric and culturally hegemonic spaces, we face the challenge that the colonising, hegemonic practices are being presented as the best, if not the only option, whilst Indigenous practices are racially and culturally marginalised by design and not considered a viable option outside of their application to Indigenous peoples who are also typically racially and culturally marginalised.

The impact of the deficit paradigm as it is comprehensively applied to Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and cultures needs to be understood.

So how does an Indigenist approach to teaching social workers look? I can reflect here on what myself and a small team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics have been doing within a single subject, as part of a Social Work degree at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. I'll then

move on to suggest how this approach to a single subject could be expanded so that an overarching Indigenist approach could be taken to the whole program.

The subject is called First Peoples and Social Justice, and it's now offered as an on campus and online option.

If we go back to the findings of my Phd research, it's clear that the starting point of an Indigenist process is the focus on relationship. I've insisted since I started teaching in this subject that it needed to be based on a team approach that would bring more than one teacher to the learning and teaching space and not rely on the very western practice of the single academic expert taking charge of the space.

This insistence is based on my previous experience of a collective approach in other university learning and teaching contexts. The collective approach has not always been supported within the university, but I'll talk more about that in the next podcast. The importance of the team approach is for the benefit of those learning and those teaching. It's a collectivist approach because we are empowering collectivist knowledge making, which is critical to an Indigenist approach.

In terms of our team approach our teaching team have spent a lot of time together over the years talking about the knowledges, beliefs and values we bring, along with the aspirations for learning and teaching we have, as individual team members. This has been an intentional and planned part of our approach; it sits outside of what is generally expected or supported by the university at the individual subject delivery level but in taking an Indigenist approach we are valuing what each of us brings to the process.

There's typically been a great deal of common ground amongst the team, even before we all knew each other well, especially around our beliefs and values, although not all team members have had the same opportunities to be socialised within First Nations family and community contexts and informed by Indigenous knowledges. On the other hand, not all team members have been on the same academic levels, with levels ranging from Level A academic, considered the starting point, through to much more senior levels.

This scenario has made team vulnerable to the hierarchical dynamics of universities, both from an Indigenous knowledges and identity perspective or from an academic status perspective, or perhaps both.

The regulating dynamic amongst the team has been humility, being supportive and the commitment of each team member not to apply a deficit lens, in any way, to other team members. This also includes gender and age.

I believe the approach of our teaching team is evidence of an Indigenist approach and it has enabled us to go above and beyond the more typical way a subject is designed and offered, which is usually via a senior lecturer or facilitator and perhaps some subordinate support staff if required, such as the more typical lecturer and support tutor scenario.

I think it's important to point out that whilst this is the approach our team has taken over several years, it's not always been an approach that is recognised, understood and supported at the administrative, supervisory and executive levels.

In many ways our Indigenist approach has mostly flown under the radar of the systematic approach to doing teaching and learning at the university, which is far from an ideal circumstance and arguably not sustainable. I believe it's the way Indigenous and Indigenist approaches, within mainstream,

culturally hegemonic systems and institutions, have had to do things and continue to do things. It is clearly not a culturally safe space.

Our Indigenist team approach to delivering this subject meant that we were ready to meet and engage incoming students with a strong sense of pedagogical consensus, a feeling of personal support and a shared vision for what and who we were representing, as an academic team, and what we hoped to achieve. I realise that I'm speaking on behalf of the team here. This is certainly the way I have felt over the years and I'm confident it's been a shared experience.

The initial challenge for engaging students and placing an emphasis on establishing positive relationships amongst learners and teachers is that this subject, like many others in the social work program is delivered to a tight and fixed schedule, as an on campus or online option.

In fact, during the recent COVID pandemic, it all went online over a two-year period. My reflection on this is that the key factor is not about whether or not we can engage with students in the same physical room or in the same online room, it's about how much time we have to facilitate that initial engagement and what we do with that time together.

Taking an Indigenist approach means that we need to get to know more about the people we are intending to teach as individuals, who have their own relationship to what we are going to be teaching about. It also means that the students get to know more about us as individuals with our own relationships to what we intending to teach. This is how we support the building of cultural safe process.

This approach is significantly different to the more common dynamic in the university learning and teaching experience whereby a relative stranger arrives in room, physical or virtual, and soon begins to deliver content to other relative strangers. And I have been part of that experience many times as student and teacher. I now believe it's not representative of a better practice approach and I'm loathed to be part of it.

Getting to know those who we'll spend time within a teaching and learning environment, supports a more effective process by establishing a stronger sense of safety and trust amongst participants. There is a strong evidence base to show that better student-teacher relationship lead to better learning outcomes. It seems ironic that this dynamic seems better researched in the earliest years of formal education and hardly considered in tertiary education (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014).

If we focus on social work education this process talks directly to one of the foundation practice approaches which is to be able to develop an understanding of who the person is you are working with, and to establish repour and trust. Even though this concept is reinforced throughout social work education as an important process to take into practice, it seems it is rarely modelled within the dynamics of the practitioner training experience.

Ideally, we would get more time at this stage of the Indigenist process than we currently do. As it stands, we spend around six hours of time introducing ourselves to students, introducing our approach to the subject philosophically and pedagogically and having students introduce themselves.

We make sure we explain to students where we are coming from. We tell them that we are taking an Indigenist approach, what beliefs and values this includes and that this is being intentionally done as an anti-colonial approach in support of decolonising tertiary education in Australia. We let the students know what we expect from them as participants and most importantly we let them know that we are here to support them as a team as we move through the learning and teaching process over the semester. We introduce the process of being able to reflect on and articulate your

positionality – who are you as an individual coming into this space and what is your current relationship to what we are introducing as process and content.

Based on this approach students get a clear message that success in this subject is about reciprocity between learners and teachers. We all have our responsibilities in this journey. We all have agency and we are all accountable within the process. That's another lesson that can be taken into practice.

As we move through the content of this subject, the learning process is based on critical reflective practice. Students are asked to critically reflect on their own positionality regarding the course content and the issues covered. They are asked to be mindful of and reflect on how they feel as they move through content and why they might be feeling the way they do.

They are also asked to share these reflections with peers so that they gain insight into the importance and relevance of diversity and intersectionality and how that shapes how we perceive and feel about various situations and circumstances.

This is another lesson that supports social work students beyond the specific coursework and into professional practice. Our positionality is always important, always relevant, as is the capacity to understand that people perceive life as individuals, not as homogenised groups. In an act of reciprocity, we have crafted the individual critical reflection process into a cumulative assessment task, so that the work put in is credited with some of the marks they will need to successfully complete the subject.

How we do assessment within a learning and teaching experience is where we really get to demonstrate the difference between being content focussed and process focussed. We've designed the assessment of the learning outcomes in this subject to provide learners with an opportunity to be part of an Indigenist process.

The major assessment tasks for this subject are based on students getting together online in small groups, to have guided conversations, based on focus questions. The students record these conversations which can be watched back later. It's not as open as a yarning process. Given that yarning is a culturally informed process, it's not equitable to expect that students can easily move into this mode to demonstrate and share ideas and knowledge. Perhaps it could be considered a gateway to yarning.

Nevertheless, this assessment is an example of an Indigenist learning and teaching approach. It requires participants to work as a non-competitive collective, to support each other's learning. Learners will also become teachers at points during the process. It supports the building of relationships between the participants in a small group. Participants get to experience how concepts such as intersectionality work in regard to how other people understand and see things. It's equitable in the sense that participants respond based on their positionality rather than as a de-identified outside observer.

This is a valuable experience for social workers in training. In the world of practice we need to exchange ideas, challenge ideas and advocate for others. Most all of this will be done in conversation, not as abstracted words on paper. We need to understand that other people will see things differently to us, based on their identities and experiences and we can only get to understand that by having equitable conversations. We need to be able to practice humility and critical self-reflection in the moment, with others.

The marking of these assessments is done by the marker watching the recording of the students discussion. Each participant is marked individually based on the quality of their response to set questions and on the quality of their response to others. Being a supportive group member is valued.

This assessment can be challenging for markers who have previously only marked individual written work such as reports and essays. It literally brings the marker face to face with the student during a vulnerable time for them. The marker is able to develop a much better understanding of who it is they are assessing.

In this way the process becomes a lot more relational, especially as the same marker will mark a series of these conversations over the trimester. As an outcome of this the markers feedback tends to be more positive and encouraging rather than critical and correcting. This makes for a better experience for both marker and student.

Each time the group come together to record their conversations the questions they're responding to become more in depth and complex. There's a continuity of exchange and feedback from the marker to the individual student and the marker is able to see it when that feedback is taken onboard in the next conversation.

In this context the marker takes on more of a teacher and mentor role and there is a humanising of what can often be a more clinically academic experience for all concerned. I believe this is another lesson beyond the immediate experience for future social workers: power can be used in more equitable and considerate ways, people are more likely to respond to compassionate engagement rather than detached, clinical engagement.

At the end of the semester students have typically built stronger peer support relationships with the other members of their group. They feel that these are people they feel safer to share their personal experiences and critical reflections with in regard to course content. There is a sense of a collective journey through the learning process.

Aside from the more specific learning outcomes of the subject, the students have been able to experience what an Indigenist approach places the highest value on, the establishment and development of relationships and relatedness as the foundation for growing awareness and knowledge.

In contrast and challenge to the all-pervasive deficit narratives focussed on Indigenous peoples and their practices, students who are engaged via an Indigenist approach to learning and teaching, learn by experience that First Nations beliefs, values and practices are welcoming, challenging, relevant, effective and inclusive. They are not just being asked to consider theoretical academic discourse about human rights and social justice. They are having an embodied experience that tells them that Indigenist practice is a legitimate and arguably preferable overarching process to engage when it comes to putting a decolonising approach into practice. This is an experience that will resonate beyond the current semester and into future learning and practice.

I believe that this humanising and normalising of Indigenous led education, in spaces where Indigenous peoples have for generations been actively dehumanised and othered, should not be underestimated.

This is not something that can be achieved by simply presenting issues, that negatively impact First Nations peoples, as content, whether it sits within an Indigenous studies focussed course or within a program such as social work.

Even when a critical studies approach is taken there is a tendency for non-Indigenous students to see Indigenous peoples and knowledges as something separate from their own lived experiences, especially their experiences of being led and educated. Racism is at its most effective when people believe that the fictional other is not as equally human in capacity and ways of being.

If an educational experience challenges the racist beliefs so critical to colonising practices at the individual identity level, based on the beliefs, values and aspirations a student or practitioner takes on board as their own, those various imagined gaps between us and them very quickly begin to disappear. It becomes non-sensical to 'other' people whose beliefs, values and aspirations resonate in concert with your own.

Going back to the examples I've presented here about the Indigenist learning and teaching practices our team has been using. I'm not suggesting these are comprehensive and represent a fully realised an Indigenist approach.

We've been able to introduce some experiences which have been received well by students. For example, we surveyed students about their experiences with the small group recorded discussions over two semesters. The results showed that 90% of students found the process to be rewarding and transformative in regard to how they came to understand the causes of socially unjust situations in colonised societies.

Students reported that they were able to understand and appreciate why we should be taking a rights-based approach to social justice rather than a welfare-based approach. These insights and changes of perspective from social work students place them in-step with the practice principles of social work within Australia and internationally.

Further to this, in regard to the student experience, our subject, First Peoples and Social Justice, has ranked in the top 5% for the best part of a decade, for student satisfaction with the subject as a whole and with the individual teaching staff.

There is a lot more we could be doing and should be doing as part of an Indigenist approach. In particular providing students with opportunities to connect with and build relationships at a community level outside the specific university-controlled spaces and providing opportunities for students to experience that critically important roll of Country as teacher. Of course the Covid 19 pandemic impacted the potential for some of this in the short term but a global health crisis has not been our most significant barrier.

Despite the positive outcomes and significant potential of our approach, the truth is that, as a team, we have had to consistently fight to maintain an Indigenist led approach within the broader Social Work and other programs that this subject sits within, in the university.

Despite a clear lack of insight and understanding, on behalf of colleagues and executive staff about what an Indigenist approach is (a situation that has motivated my choice of PhD topic), and what resources it requires to function, our approach has been regularly critiqued both in regard to how we work as a team and the way we design and implement assessment.

It's a paradoxical situation, given what we are sharing with students about deficit paradigms and continuing colonising practices.

We do have allies within the faculty whose reasons for supporting the approach we take is not always clear, although it seems clear to me via our conversations that they too do not fully understand what an Indigenist approach is. We do get feedback from colleagues that our subject has

a profound positive impact on students which they carry into their other subjects and our team has previously been nominated for a national teaching award based on this.

As it currently stands, our team, this subject I've been highlighting and other First Nations focussed subjects we teach have been profoundly impacted by changes made at executive levels within the faculty and beyond.

The Indigenist approach we had managed to develop and maintain has been severely compromised, most significantly at our collective team level. In the space of two years, we have gone from having an Indigenous led and staffed team of four full-time academic staff, to myself as the only Indigenous and fulltime academic staff member delivering this course and others, with the support of sessional and part-time staff.

The team approach is not sustainable under these circumstances. My own experience within academia and wider collegial networks tells me that this is far from an isolated situation when it comes to First Nations Peoples asserting a right to develop and lead Indigenous/Indigenist practice. I feel it's critically important to explore this in discussing the potential of Indigenist education practice versus the current challenges we face. My next podcast will unpack this.

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