

Conclusion

My primary research question in this study was to explore what defines an Indigenous Australian approach to learning and teaching in a contemporary context.

My research found that there are several key concepts and practices, shared amongst a culturally diverse cross section of First Nations Australian education practitioners, that can be considered an overarching Indigenous or Indigenist approach to learning and teaching.

These concepts and practices can be summarised as the following.

Relationships and relatedness are the foundation to an Indigenous approach to learning and teaching. Relationships that support the values and aspirations of an Indigenous learning and teaching should be established before any specific learning and teaching activity and content is engaged with. This starts from the premise that we are all related.

Country is a sentient and active participant in the learning and teaching experience. Country is an important teacher. We are always on country. Not all Indigenous learning and teaching practice has to be done in geographically specific locations however it may also be important to be in geographically specific locations, depending on what is being shared and with who.

The significant ontological and epistemological differences between an Indigenous and Western approach to learning and teaching mean that Indigenous learning and teaching will be a significantly different experience based on significantly different aims and objectives.

Our previous learning and teaching experiences need to be understood from a critically reflective perspective as we come together in a learning and teaching space.

The specific First Nations knowledges and practices that inform and shape an Indigenous approach to learning and teaching must be acknowledged and respected above everything else. Respecting and protecting the custodial rights to specific cultural knowledge and practices is paramount.

My secondary reflective questions were.

1. What is the potential of Indigenous teaching and learning processes to contribute to improved professional practice?

2. What are the challenges to implementing Indigenous learning and teaching practices into tertiary education spaces.?

My reflections highlighted that Indigenous/Indigenist teaching and learning processes have significant potential to contribute to improved professional practice. I reflected specifically on my teaching

within an undergraduate and postgraduate social work program to make this point. An Indigenist approach takes into consideration the values and beliefs that a learner will take with them and apply beyond the immediate learning experience and into social and professional life.

I was able to connect the learning and teaching work my colleagues and I were already doing within these programs to concepts and practices identified within the primary research question. This provides confidence that the processes I was reflecting on are examples of Indigenist practices, albeit currently limited in scope and application due to the hegemonic education culture in which they are delivered.

My reflections on the challenges to implementing Indigenous/Indigenist learning and teaching practices into tertiary education spaces drew on my reflections of my own experience over twenty-five years in tertiary education. This was supported by relevant literature, specific to an Australian university context.

I have argued that there are currently significant systematic and structural challenges within the Australian university context due to dominating hegemonic cultural beliefs and practices, borne of white supremacist and colonising ideologies. These beliefs and practices are deeply entrenched to the point of being normalised at personal through to structural levels within universities. This is so even though myself and many other academics within Australian universities seek to champion scholarship, teaching and applied research based on anti-oppressive theory and practice and are employed to do so by the university.

This paradoxical scenario within Australian universities makes for culturally unsafe learning and teaching spaces and represents significant personal risk to the wellbeing of those who challenge the academy to systematically and structurally include an anti-oppressive approach. This is particularly so for First Nations staff and thus makes the current environment unsustainable regarding the systematic engagement and actioning of Indigenist approaches to learning and teaching.

I conceptualized and designed my research process from an Indigenous standpoint, based on Indigenist Standpoint theory as developed and discussed by Dr Uncle Errol West, Dr Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Dr Dennis Foley, Dr Martin Nakata, (West, 2000; Moreton Robinson, 2004; Foley, 2006; Nakata, 2007;) I took an overarching Indigenous Research Methodological approach as defined and developed by Dr Linda Tuwai Smith, Dr Lester Irabinna Rigney, Dr Shawn Wilson and many other First Nations scholars over the past two decades (Rigney, 2001; Wilson, 2020; Smith, 2021).

The critical foundational elements of an Indigenous Research Methodological approach are based on relationships of integrity with people and place in the spaces that research takes place, a commitment to the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, including knowledge and data sovereignty and a commitment to social justice and the decolonization of research theory and practice.

I used a qualitative, hybrid, mixed methods approach to gathering and analysing the data for the primary research question, and I engaged autoethnographic critical reflection to discuss the secondary questions. I engaged a yarning method with an invited community of expert participants, to build a body of stories, knowledges, opinions and conclusions that were thematically analysed for similarity, consistency and patterns of connection.

The yarning analysis process relied on a blended deductive and inductive approach that worked from an overarching sameness hypothesis between existing literature and the outcome of the yarns. This approach required the identification of themes and sub themes via an inductive analysis and positioned these alongside a deductive analysis drawn from relevant literature and my own professional practice experience.

To maintain the integrity of the Indigenous methodological practice, yarning participants were empowered to maintain control and ownership of their stories, knowledges, opinions and conclusions throughout the research process. No findings were finalized and published without seeking the feedback and approval of research participants. There was a strong consensus amongst yarning participants regarding the validity of the findings, with ten out of twelve participants expressing their agreement. No yarning participants voiced a disagreement. Two yarning participants did not respond with agreement or disagreement. The inclusion of the yarning participants in the development of the analysis and findings provided an additional layer of process and outcomes trustworthiness as the research participants had a strong cultural and professional knowledge by which to scrutinize and validate the deductive hypothesis and findings I introduced.

I used an autoethnographic reflective method to engage the two secondary research questions. This approach allowed me to draw on my extensive experience over twenty five years of learning and teaching practice within university and other teaching contexts. I drew on relevant literature to further support my critical points and observations.

Given the research questions engaged for this Ph.D. I feel that an Indigenous Research Methodological approach was the appropriate and perhaps only ethical methodological approach to engage. The principles and tenants of Indigenous Research Methodology provided the framework that supported a socially just and culturally safe approach to these questions, for myself, but most importantly for the First Nations practitioners that responded to my invitation to be research participants. This methodological approach also allowed for and accommodated the hybrid, mixed methods approach I chose for the analysis and determination of findings.

I feel that my decision to present my Ph.D. as a digital work, via a website was the right choice based on the commitments I made at the outset of my research journey, that my work should be accessible and transparent at the broader community level, outside of the academy and an academic audience, and in particular a First Nations community audience. This approach also aligns with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies ethical research guidelines regarding research being of benefit to the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The website is also a creative product of my Ph.D. study. I had to develop my IT skills to do this as I have designed and produced the website myself. I have also recorded and edited all the audio components of the Ph.D. presentation. This process has provided me with a broader professional learning and knowledge set that I will be able to utilize and share as an educator. The digital approach to presenting my work has been a challenging process that is certainly no easier or time saving than traditional text-based writing, however I feel that I have developed my understanding of how research can be presented in more equitable and accessible ways.

I feel that this study provides both a model and a motivation for further research into applied Indigenist theory and practice. I believe there is great potential for Indigenist theory and practice to be considered, engaged and experienced in a far wider context than I have presented here. I believe Indigenist approaches can provide viable, sustainable alternatives to current hegemonic and non-inclusive approaches to the design, delivery and governance of education policy and practice within Australia and beyond. There is a very wide-ranging opportunity to explore this potential via research.

I feel confident that my research has played a significant role in helping to clarify and understand the depth to which culturally diverse First Nations within Australia have a shared ontological, epistemological and methodological approach to how knowledge and wisdom is shared and passed on to others. Whilst this has been something that has been implied and suggested via academic and non-academic literature, the lack of research-based evidence to confirm that more fully had been lacking. I hope that my research may encourage and support diverse First Nations educators and their non-indigenous allies to collaborate from the strengths-based focus that the Indigenist approach takes.

My Ph.D. research journey has been a long one, spaced over eight years part-time whilst working full-time within a university teaching context and being engaged in a full family and community life. There have been many challenges to overcome to get to completion. There have also been some encouraging developments in the applied Indigenous and Indigenist knowledges space during this time.

In a somewhat unusual approach, I have ended up completing my Ph.D. in the later part of my academic career rather than as the catalyst for starting my career. Given that my academic career started more than two decades ago, via my connection to First Nations communities and country, I feel my research has been going for far longer than eight years. The completion of this Ph.D. brings me a sense of closure but also a renewed sense of enthusiasm. I now have a more cohesive reference and resource point from which I can continue my yarning approach within the academy and outside of it. I have a more focused sense of how to champion Indigenist theory and practice and a renewed belief that First Nations peoples and knowledges are the key to providing guidance and leadership in the process of decolonising education and professional practice.

References

- Foley, D. (2006). Indigenous Standpoint Theory. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 3(8).
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004). Whiteness, epistemology and Indigenous representation. *Whitening race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, 1, 75-88.
- Nakata, M. (2007b). *Disciplining the savages: Savaging the disciplines*. Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Rigney, L. I. (2001). A first perspective of Indigenous Australian participation in science: Framing Indigenous research towards Indigenous Australian intellectual sovereignty.
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books Ltd.
- West, E. G. (2000). *An alternative to existing Australian research and teaching models: The Japanangka teaching and research paradigm; an Australian Aboriginal model*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Southern Cross University.
- Wilson, S. (2020). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood publishing.