COMMON GROUND FOR RIGHTS-BASED EDUCATION:

WHAT DEFINES AN INDIGENIST APPROACH TO LEARNING AND TEACHING IN AUSTRALIA?

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ABSTRACT

First Nations peoples have distinct approaches to learning and teaching, passed down intergenerationally for thousands of years, largely ignored by settler-colonial education institutions in developing policy and practice. A thematic analysis of yarns with 12 diverse First Nations educators found shared agreement about values, beliefs and approaches that inform an Indigenous/ist approach to learning and teaching in Australia. Four key themes emerged from this common ground: Relationship, Country, Practice Experiences and Knowledge Systems. While there are some similarities across recent literature about First Nations pedagogies, there is currently no collective agreement amongst Australia's diverse First Nations groups on what defines an Indigenous/ist learning and teaching approach. There are also significant differences between the findings of this study and the dominant, Anglocentric learning and teaching approaches operationalised by the Australian settler-colonial State, particularly at a tertiary level. The settler-colonial State's failure to consider First Nations approaches as an option in mainstream tertiary education context is at odds with a rights-based approach, pointing to a need to decolonise education. The four themes emerging from these yarns comprise an Indigenist approach and an opportunity to negotiate the inclusion of First Nations learning and teaching experiences across the national education context.

Australia is home to hundreds of First Nations[1] societies who represent the most successful enduring societies humanity has known (Pascoe, 2018; Yunkaporta, 2019). At the time of British invasion, the continent comprised one of the most biologically and linguistically diverse regions on earth (Gammage, 2012). The initial British, and then Anglo-Australian colonising project, had profound negative impacts on country, the foundation of Indigenous identity, culture and society. This ecocide was accompanied by brutal attacks on First Nations peoples, amounting to coordinated and systematic attempts at genocide. The continued consequences of this history include extensive community-based intergenerational trauma for surviving First Nations peoples and one of the worst non-human species extinction outcomes of the last 200 years (Atkinson, 2002; Recher, 2002). Today, First Nations societies in Australia continue humanity's oldest traditions, maintaining distinct cultural identities that are vastly different epistemologically and ontologically to the Anglocentric culture of settler-colonial Australia. Processes and practices of learning and teaching are fundamental to the maintenance and ongoing development of these intergenerational systems of knowledge.

By contrast, settler-colonial education systems in Australia (re)produce broader discourses where powerful narratives minimise, re-frame, and deny First Nations peoples' and societies' recognition of successful ongoing civilisation (Pascoe, 2018; Rowse, 2014). The achievement, enduring genius, and relatively harmonious multicultural mosaic representative of First Nations civilisation in Australia has been reduced, via the colonising project, to narratives of the grossly primitive, dangerous and deficit 'Aborigine' (Reynolds, 2000; Fforde et al., 2013.; Watego, 2021), which work to provide ongoing justification to the primacy of the settler-colonial state. This colonial narrative is pervasive even in 21st Century educational and pedagogical scholarship (Walton, 2017; Gunstone, 2009).

Australian policy and practice as applied to First Nations peoples remains culturally hegemonic and cloaked in the language and practice of socioeconomic welfare and remedial

[1] The terms 'First Nations' is used when pointing to the diverse cultures in Australia, while Indigenous is used to point to concepts shared by these groups and connecting globally in terms of international rights.

development, rather than operating from a rights-based framework (Nakata, 2007b; Yunkaporta, 2009; Woods, 2016). Contemporary First Nations education policy focuses on the successful *inclusion* of First Nations peoples into Anglo-Australian controlled systems of education as well as *helping* achieve successful outcomes as defined within settler-colonial aspirations (Woods, 2016). This is very clearly seen even in the most recent educational policy and curricula, especially at a tertiary level. In their critical literature review identifying the issues and challenges of implementing the University Australia 2017-2020 Indigenous Strategy, Anderson et. al. note that one of three key themes was the "embedment of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in the curriculum" (2023, p. 789). They note that key challenges of embedding First Nations knowledge and perspectives include the continued dominance of Western knowledges and the varied approach to doing so across universities (Anderson et. al., 2023, p. 793).

There is no legal recognition within Australia that First Nations peoples maintain a right to define and practice their own education systems based on recognition of sovereign rights or other agreements negotiated with the settler-colonial state (Behrendt, 2012). This is despite Australia being a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007) which stipulates the right of Indigenous peoples to "establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of learning and teaching" (UN, 2007). To meet this fundamental human right, higher education institutions in Australia must understand the role of Indigenous philosophies, knowledges, and knowledge-sharing practices both in their own right, and also in regard to how mainstream education is defined, delivered, and experienced within Australia (Nakata, 2007a; Woods, 2016).

As a First Nations educator with decades of experience at secondary and tertiary levels, I have lived experience of both the complexities of integrating First Nations learning and teaching approaches in the university system and the challenges of operating as a staff member with

epistemological, ontological and axiological approaches incongruous with the dominant Anglocentric culture of education institutions. This experience and my acknowledgement of it here is an important aspect of Indigenist research methodologies built on 'reflexivity, ethics and positionality' (Kwame, 2017, p. 1); my relational placement as both researcher and practitioner inside a university affords me a unique position from which to understand the findings of this study and assess their implications. (Smith, 1999; Martin, 2006). From experience, I have found that contemporary scholarship and practice of decolonising education lacks contextual focus and is yet to centre Indigenous/ist approaches to education as a viable option. Privileging First Nations systems of knowledge production, with an understanding that these have supported and maintained people and place at unprecedented levels of success, is imperative to providing an alternative to, and ultimately overturning, dominant settler-colonial narratives and supporting rights-based educational frameworks (Pascoe, 2018; Yunkaporta, 2019).

FINDING COMMON GROUND

This research transpires against the history of education in the Australian settler-colonial state, with its legacies that, until very recently, expose continued disregard of First Nations pedagogies. While there is clear recognition of First Nations diversity within contemporary education scholarship, the depth of *shared* epistemological, ontological and axiological approaches to learning and teaching has not yet been clearly articulative collectively by First Nations scholars and practitioners (Prehn et al., 2020; Woods, 2016; Yunkaporta, 2009). This has implications for both educators and students attempting to define and engage with First Nations knowledge systems. Of the relatively little published discussion regarding Australian Indigenous pedagogies generally, three notable examples are the work of Nakata (2007); Yunkaporta (2009) and West (2000). Dr Tyson Yunkaporta's doctoral research (2009) inspired the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's '8 Ways Pedagogy Training Program', an example of Indigenous pedagogical practice being engaged within a mainstream education context. Dr Martin Nakata's 'cultural interface', as a 'multi-layered and

multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations ..,within and between different knowledge traditions', contains epistemological, ontological and axiological dimensions for asserting First Nations learning and teaching in mainstream settings (Nakata, 2007, p. 197). Notably, these scholars tend to maintain a culturally specific focus, arising from their own distinct cultural perspective. Yunkaporta's Aboriginal pedagogy is considered and developed within a Apalech/Wik cultural context (2009), West's work is strongly aligned to a Walpiri context (West, 2000), and Nakata's work is considered from a Torres Strait Islander context (Nakata 2007). Reading across these culturally specific educational works, there are indeed shared First Nations beliefs, values, practices and aspirations, although these remain unarticulated by published research.

Burgess et al. suggest that "definitions and detail about [Indigenous] pedagogies are mostly absent, relying on 'common understandings' of what pedagogy means" (2019, p. 297). Critically, if there is no clear or shared understanding of the purpose and process of First Nations approaches to learning and teaching, further discussion about why and how that process is engaged is also compromised. This leaves the integrity and authority of First Nations-defined, -designed and -led education vulnerable to the continuation of imposed, non-Indigenous definitions and practices.

This research provides an evidenced based starting point from which to explore a broader understanding of what defines an Indigenous/ist approach to learning and teaching, by considering whether or not there are indeed common and shared values and beliefs that underpin and define a Indigenous/ist approach broadly. It then considers the implications of a shared approach to First Nations learning and teaching as critical to supporting the decolonisation of education practice in Australia.

THE STUDY: WHAT DEFINES A CONTEMPORARY FIRST NATIONS APPROACH TO LEARNING AND TEACHING IN AUSTRALIA?

Methodology: Indigenous standpoint theory, yarning, and place

This research was conducted using Indigenous research methodologies, underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Briese & Menzel, 2020; Foley, 2006; Kwaymullina, 2017), chosen for its capacity to directly represent the voices of First Nations peoples, prioritise First Nations agendas, and place First Nations research participants in an active and empowered role regarding how knowledge is shared, represented and analysed. Nakata defines Indigenous Standpoint Theory as "a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible 'the corpus of objectified knowledge about us' as it emerges and organises understanding of our lived realities" (2007b, p.215). A commitment to Indigenous Standpoint Theory requires implementation of research practices that highlight the ownership of the knowledge investigated by the communities from which it comes, including recognising there must be direct benefit to these communities.

A key background understanding for this research is therefore the interaction of the specific cultural identities of different communities within the broader context of First Nations identity in relation to the colonial Nation. The author recognises the multicultural reality and sovereign governance rights of First Nations societies throughout Australia. However, this does not limit a culturally safe inquiry around shared ground between and among First Nations societies. Such discussions have been facilitated through extensive and complex sociocultural networks throughout the continent for millenia (Yunkaporta, 2019), evidenced by traditional kinship systems and songline networks that continue to unite multiple individual First Nations societies over vast geographic spaces (Fuller, 2020; Keen, 1988). A belief that this common ground, established and maintained prior to colonisation, continues despite colonial disruption, prefaces this research. This does not discount that First Nations cultures have adapted in response to the colonising experience, introducing numerous other ontological and epistemological reference points, often by force via assimilationist

government policies and settler-colonial cultural norms (Clark, 2000; McGregor, 2009). Human culture is a fluid, dynamic concept: to this end First Nations peoples are free to engage with, embrace, or reject new ideas, beliefs, and values just as members of any multicultural society may do (Wyer et al., 2009). Questions of cultural authenticity and legitimacy are issues that can be discussed amongst members within a group or society, as part of the shared human philosophical tradition. Such discussions should be differentiated from those coming from outside these specific social and cultural spaces, which impose uninvited and uninformed judgements regarding authenticity, particularly via the Anglo Australian hegemony (Harris et al., 2013). In this research, cultural identity and authenticity were approached from this insider perspective, particularly given the author's own positionality.

The primary knowledge sharing method used in this research was yarning, recognised as a First Nations conversational-based method of sharing and exchange (Atkinson et. al., 2021) that differs considerably from other qualitative 'talk methods' such as interviews (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010). Whilst yarning may be considered relatively new in the mainstream qualitative research space, it is grounded in a long and deep tradition (Atkinson et al., 2021). This method was chosen primarily to support a First Nations-based, culturally safe and egalitarian approach to engagement between the First Nations researcher and the First Nations participants.

Aligning with Indigenous Standpoint Theory, a significant aspect of yarning is the recognition that those who share knowledge continue to be the custodians and managers of that information (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010). Thus, participants were invited to provide feedback on the process and outcomes of the researchers' analysis, as a way of maintaining an ongoing yarn and to clarify, include or edit anything that did not accurately represent their views. Participant voices were not anonymised unless requested. Consent to represent participants' voices was obtained at multiple points of the research process. These practices

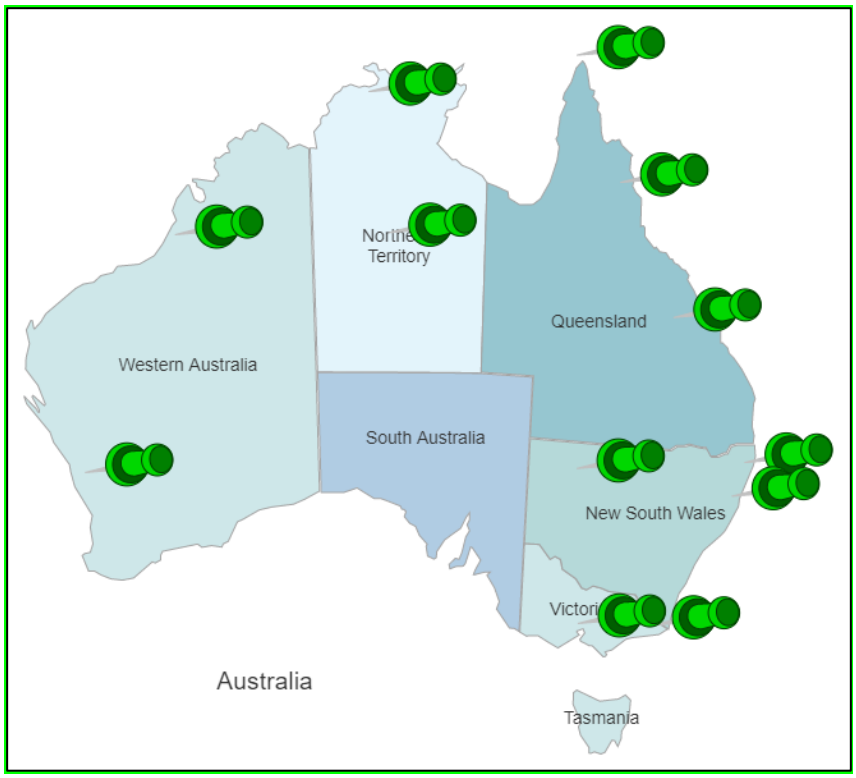
all work to shift the historical objectification of First Nations knowledges by university-based researchers as highlighted by Nakata (2007b), and Martin (2006).

Participants

Participant selection was designed to reflect as broad a diversity as possible, with a primary focus on cultural diversity. Invited participants were First Nations peoples from Australia, who identify as practitioners working with First Nations approaches to learning and teaching. The final participant group was representative of at least 20 culturally specific First Nations groups, from a wide geographical area across the continent, incorporating urban, rural and remote educational settings (figure 1). All participants had cultural connections through professional and kinship networks as well as broader cultural experiences upon which they drew. While it is difficult to comprehensively represent First Nations societies, the extensive sociocultural networks of participants strengthened the diversity within this study. All yarning participants identified as either Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Four participants had a culturally distinct Torres Strait Islander background.

Figure 1

GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF PARTICIPANTS



There was equal representation of people who identify as female and people who identify as male. A deliberate attempt was made to seek a male and female gender balance, although the author acknowledges the potential binary over-simplication of this process due to the complexity and culturally determined nature of gender identification (Sullivan & Day, 2021). Gender was an important factor because First Nations societies in Australia have clearly expressed lore/laws, traditions, customs, and social norms around gender, commonly referred to as ‘men’s and women’s business’ (Yunkaporta 2019). It is also the personal cultural understanding of the author that identification of and discussion about women’s and men’s business within First Nations contexts is pervasive and broadly accepted, including for concepts around educational practice and process. It was made explicit in written and spoken information preceding the yarn that the right and responsibility to accept an invitation and control what was disclosed rested with the participant. None of the participants requested gender specific rules or protocols, however the right to do so was made clear.

Data collection

Participants were asked to nominate a time and location of their choosing to conduct the yarn, as a method to support cultural safety and include place as a significant consideration in First Nations knowledge-sharing processese(Moran et al., 2018). Participants identified a range of locations as a 'good place' to have a yarn, including their homes, workplaces, or other specific locations on country. Participants were given a suggested time frame of one to four hours for the yarn. The length of resulting yarns was between one to three hours, with a two hour average. The yarns were audio recorded with permission. Transcripts were produced by a professional service and were cross-checked with participants for accuracy. Both the audio recordings and transcripts were used for analysis.

During the yarns, conversation centred around the primary research question: What defines a First Nations approach to learning and teaching in Australia? Responses often included stories rather than 'concise answers.' This is central to Indigenous research methodology, which aims to honour the cultural integrity of participants and centre the unique interaction between participants, researchers and Country, above and beyond the production of particular results (Drawson et al., 2017; Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2001).

Data Analysis

Analysis was a qualitative hybrid method that included narrative and thematic analysis through inductive and deductive approaches (Swain, 2018), considered appropriate due to the non-linear way the yarning process takes shape. This approach was further guided by Schutz's social phenomenology approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 1) and the Shawn Wilson's Indigenous research approach presented which encourages researchers to honour and reflect the relational experiences of research collaborators and to enable ongoing reflective and reflexive process for all involved (Wilson, 2020). These approaches were chosen for their potential to explore the subjective experiences that are captured within a yarning process, to include the lived experiences of the researchers and to allow for the integration of existing theories and relevant literature. Inductive and deductive approaches were combined to support the process of coding and the presentation of themes that reflect a

broader capturing of the holistic knowledge within the research process (Xu and Zammit, 2020, p. 1).

After the author listed an initial list of key themes and their contexts on first listening, each recording was then checked a second time to confirm these themes. The identified themes were then used as reference points to analyse each transcript in more detail. In this stage, more inductively derived themes and thematic contexts were identified and added to create the final list of saturated collective themes. A third and final review of all transcripts was conducted to identify the frequency of themes and thematic contexts mapped against the collection of yarns, using NVIVO. In keeping with the principles of Indigenous research methodologies (Wilson, 2020), results were shared back with yarning participants for consideration and further comment. No participants disagreed with the findings, nor suggested additional themes or sub-themes. Importantly, this suggests a strong consensus amongst participants. Ethical approval was granted by the lead institution Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ###) and adhered to the Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (Values and Ethics) (NHMRC, 2003).

RESULTS

Key Themes and Contexts

Several key themes emerged regarding the primary research question: what defines a contemporary First Nations approach to learning and teaching in Australia? A key theme was defined as one that all participants spoke to in at least one or more contextual setting/s. Table 1 summarises these themes.

Table 1

Summary of Key Themes and Contexts (in Highest to Lowest Frequency of Mentions)

Theme	Sub-Themes
Relationships	• Relationships as the foundation of process.

	• The importance of relationships between learners and teachers. • Learning in relationship. • Relationship to place and country.
country	• The significance of country in Indigenous learning and teaching practice. • Country as teacher.
Practice Experiences	• The difference between Indigenous and Western approaches to learning and teaching. • The significance of understanding an Indigenous learning and teaching process. • What defines an Indigenous learning and teaching process. • The significance of culture as a defining difference in learning and teaching practice. • The significance of historic experiences. • What defines authenticity of Indigenous learning and teaching practice.
Knowledge Systems	• The significance of knowledge systems. • Differences between knowledge systems. • Respect for cultural values. • Cultural integrity. • The significance of culture as a defining difference in learning and teaching practice.

Relationships

"They should know about being who they are in relationship"

(Mr Ian Pedrisat, yarn, 2019)

All participants discussed the importance of relationships: how they are considered, valued, and utilised within First Nations learning and teaching processes and practices; and how they affect the learning and teaching experience. The valuing and significance of relationships was consistently highlighted in discussing critical differences between Indigenous and Western process and practice. The building of relationships between learning and teaching participants, and between participants and country, was identified as the most important consideration of a First Nations approach to learning and teaching in Australia:

> There have been very deliberate choices of spaces of high current significance. I think that's important, however I think that sense of connectedness and relatedness and being human together could theoretically be created in places anywhere. It's not just about the place, it's about how we are together, how long we are together, spending more than 1, 2 or 3 hours together, needing to eat and sleep and rest, and you know, play together across all times of the day. I think that is a really, really important part of it, perhaps as important as where we are…Being humans together beyond just meeting in a classroom–sharing food, helping each other to sleep safely, prepare food, be safe together.
>
> (Dr Marcelle Townsend- Cross, yarn, 2019)

Clear links were made between the quality of relationships among teachers and learners and the quality of experiences as an outcome of this. Participants prioritised as significant experiences of groups and individuals both prior to and during the learning and teaching process.

The yarns suggest that for a First Nations approach, previous experiences of participants need to be recognised, acknowledged, and understood as they affect and shape the way teachers and learners relate to each other and place:

> You had a deep relationship with them outside the classroom before you get in the classroom, so I think how you are valued can only be from developing a relationship with somebody and getting to know them.
>
> (Dr Anne Poelina, yarn, 2019)
>
> Taking care of people and having those good relationships with them extends to the way you want people to engage within the teaching.
>
> (Deidentified participant, yarn, 2019).
>
> Whatever we think of as a university and a place of higher learning, I think that it's got so far away from what I call really deep higher learning that we've lost the essence of who we are as humans, because it is our relationships with each other (and I include the natural non-human world in these relationships), that teach us.
>
> (Professor Judy Atkinson, personal communication yarn, 2019).

The building of relationships is such a fundamental foundation to learning and teaching experiences that they should ideally be established and understood before any specific learning and teaching takes place.

Country

All participants highlighted the significance of country and other physical cultural spaces. This included the importance of having access to country and being able to go to specific places on country for learning and teaching facilitation, pointing to the concept of country itself as teacher. 'Country as teacher' stands out as most distinct from dominant Western pedagogies:

> For us, we see country as alive and that it has power and can evoke memory because it holds memory, so for me coming here it's all about those sorts of things, it's a total relationship with the land like we talk about relationships with people, but there's a

> deep entrenched relationship for me that comes from time…this sense of place and space is critical with what else we can evoke from this process of learning and sharing.
>
> (Poelina, yarn, 2019)

> It's more than just to have an out-of-class activity, no! It's far more valuable and important to sit outside our classrooms, to sit in a space and a place filled with our teachers.
>
> (Mr Bilyana Blomeley, yarn, 2019).

> so what I'm saying is there is this kind of knowledge and country go together and experience and country go together and love of the country and knowledge of spirits and stories about spirits and country and that singing out to country. And so the country is an active character in conversations and therefore it deserves to be an active actant.
>
> (Sandra, yarn, 2019)

While country was identified as central to First Nations learning and teaching practices, the yarning participants did not insist that any or all learning and teaching practice be conducted in specific geographic locations away from existing mainstream settings or institutions for the process and experience to be considered authentic. The point was consistently made that we are always on country, including if we are within the spaces defined by formal education institutions, and the authority of the First Nations peoples of that country also remains regardless of any colonising impositions.

> Even when we are in the classroom on campus, we are on country, that's the way I view Australian sovereign territories, despite what colonial overlays there are.
>
> (Dr Marcelle Townsend-Cross, yarn, 2019)

It then follows that opportunities to experience Indigenous learning and teaching in practice are not lost in any location, to any person, including the most urban. This is an important challenge to stereotypes that locate authentic Indigenous experiences in remote or 'natural locations', away from urbanised 'mainstream' contexts.

Practice Experiences

The practice experiences theme encapsulates participants' explanations of what shapes a First Nations learning and teaching experience along with a range of factors that influence that experience for teachers and learners. Participants identified that there were important culturally based factors that differentiate a First Nations approach to learning and teaching from others, particularly from the dominant Anglo Australian approach of most formal education settings. There was shared concern that the cultural integrity and purpose of First Nations practices can be negatively affected and compromised when attempts are made to blend or include 'Indigenous perspectives' within these more dominant practice settings.

> The two agendas are completely different, so as soon as you start considering facts like this is the oldest civilisation on earth, this civilisation invented bread, society, something similar to democracy, you can't have a conversation in that space which is anything like conventional Western teaching, it just can't happen, you're talking about totally different things.
>
> (Bruce Pascoe, yarn, 2019)

> I'm here because I feel very disillusioned about the western paradigms [in which] I was taught to become the practitioner that I am and it's not actually hitting the mark anymore and I can see there is so much more, it's really interesting and I feel there's a really slow recognition that the indigenous world view is the human world view.
>
> (Alana Marsh, yarn, 2019)

Many participants pointed to the sense of disillusionment and frustration when trying to work within settler-colonial education systems as champions of Indigenous learning and teaching practice.

Knowledge Systems

Yarning participants made a number of consistent points regarding how First Nations knowledge systems inform learning and teaching practice, particularly from the perspective of maintaining cultural integrity and values. In yarning about cultural integrity, participants frequently highlighted the difficulty of having to navigate tensions between practice as informed by First Nations knowledge systems and practice that is informed by hegemonic Anglo Australian knowledge systems.

> The power of the circle is in our culture, in Indigenous culture, in our country in every other Indigenous countries of the world. Anyone who sits closely with deep ecology of the earth, understands and feels the power of the circle.
>
> (Blomeley, yarn, 2019)
>
> That's what Aboriginal culture does, it places it back onto personal responsibility, you are personally responsible to behave properly otherwise you are programmed to dysfunction and fall apart so you have a responsibility to yourself, to your family to the country around you and all the creatures and plants that live on that country, it's all about responsibility.
>
> (Ian Pedrisat, yarn, 2019)

Yarning participants further talked about the importance of being able to share their culture from a philosophical and practice-based perspective with all people, especially in learning and teaching settings in which there are both First Nations and non-Indigenous participants. This

followed a perceived lack of understanding about First Nations values, beliefs and practices within professional learning and teaching settings.

> Magani Malu, a spiritual whirlpool of wisdom which we as indigenous people don't have the patent on, it's freely open to anybody and everybody who listen with an open heart."
>
> (Blomeley, yarn, 2019)
>
> Aboriginal people have this knowledge system that has been created over millennia that shows they have all these multiple disciplines as well in terms of science knowledge, but it's actual wisdom and then we bring a white scientist here and show him that ridge and we say what is this and he says that was an ancient river before the Fitzroy river and that the old people can tell you how it travels and where it comes up, there is an epitome in terms of wisdom.
>
> (Poelina, yarn, 2019)
>
> That land didn't belong to you, this is not some airy fairy thing, the land didn't belong to you, so you couldn't own it or give it away, you couldn't take it, she was herself, she was Mother Earth. It's a completely different philosophical stance, the two modes of thought can't come close together unless Western people can understand what Australian Aboriginal people were doing.
>
> (Pascoe, yarn, 2019)

The issue of authenticity was raised with all yarning participants. Yarning participants defined the authenticity of learning and teaching practice as being informed and guided by First Nations philosophies, beliefs, and values. For authenticity to be honoured and protected, teaching practitioners need to be both educated about, and committed to, the sharing and maintenance of these philosophies, beliefs, and values. A number of participants commented that race-based identities and culturally-defined identities are two different things. Race is an

imposed definition that doesn't relate directly or inherently to knowledge and understanding from a First Nations perspective.

> Just because a person is Aboriginal it doesn't mean necessarily that their methods, information is totally correct and their methods have an indigenous component, is it coming from a good place, from a good purpose, from people who are genuinely interested in promoting that area, and is it following a methodology that helps to communicate the genuine feeling?
>
> (Pedrisat, yarn, 2019)

In further support of not focussing on race, the opportunity for non-Indigenous practitioners to be educated through an Indigenous learning and teaching experience was highlighted by participants.

> You're learning about a different way of thinking that a particular group of people who have a particular space that you're occupying, think feel and behave, but that's not for you to be an expert on until you've engaged with those people..and that's the same for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, because everybody is different.
>
> (Pedrisat, yarn, 2019).
>
> I don't want you to be me, I want you to be you. I want me to be me, within the safety of the circle, that word you use, egalitarian, we have flattened the power of the differential.
>
> (Blomeley, yarn, 2019)

These quotes point to the importance of inclusivity in First Nations knowledge systems.

DISCUSSION

A Common Ground in A Culturally Diverse Context

The results demonstrate a strong sense of agreement among all participants regarding key concepts and practices that determine an Indigenous approach to learning and teaching in a contemporary Australian context, as grouped into the four themes. This is important given the participants represent a diverse, multicultural First Nations cohort who work across a broad education space. Without a strong sense of interconnected and shared beliefs, values, and practice approaches as identified in these yarns, educators may continue to make assumptions about First Nations pedagogies and misunderstand the significance of diversity.

Given that much of the literature regarding First Nations pedagogies and education practice is from more culturally and regionally specific contexts (Nakata, 2007; West, 2000; Yunkaporta, 2009) it remains difficult for those engaging with that literature to make the connections identified by these findings. Building generalisations from localised cultural contexts requires caution. This research therefore offers some broader understandings about the Indigenist nature of First Nations approaches to learning and teaching, developed from a culturally safe methodology specifically designed to deliver a culturally-guided broader consensus.

The tension between the cultural specificity of existing First Nations education approaches and the desire for a more broadly applicable pedagogy is evident in the application of Yunkaporta's work in the development of the 8 Ways Pedagogy program by the NSW Department of Education. Yunkaporta's initial exploration of a First Nations pedagogy presents as an example of more culturally specific framework, that has subsequently been adapted beyond that space by First Nations communities in Western New South Wales, and then applied further across a national context. This tension is considered on the 8 Ways website, which notes that 'the 8 Ways belong to a place, not a person or organisation. They came from country in Western New South Wales', while at the same time offering some more general 'Cultural Interface Protocols.' (NSW Department of Education, n.d.)

Arguably the example of other First Nations groups valuing Yunkaporta's culturally-specific model of pedagogy seems to align with the findings of this research regarding the existence of commonly held beliefs and values around learning and teaching amongst diverse First Nations

groups. However, the development of the 8 Ways Pedagogy was conducted in a limited regional context, in North-Western New South Wales. Drawing together 12 First Nations educators from across Australia, the findings of this research provide a stronger evidence base to identify that common shared beliefs, values and process operate across a much larger geographic and cultural footprint than have previously been considered.

A Rights-based Process

All participants recognised that there are unique aspects to Indigenous learning and teaching practices that include consideration of both process and content within the context of cultural integrity. Process (the doing) was where the strongest intersections of commonality and shared practice were identified. Content (what was focused on or specifically shared) was where consideration and caution around culturally specific knowledge was highlighted. Here, process is where the integrity and the authenticity is maintained; culturally guided process delivers culturally grounded content.

Participants also agreed that culturally specific law and customs considerations must be understood and honoured above and beyond any other learning and teaching agenda. This was seen as a First Nations rights-based issue, beyond best practice or broader protocols. How such rights are acknowledged and protected beyond a First Nations sociocultural practice space is a critical question that should not be overlooked when thinking about negotiating practice at the cultural interface.

Intercultural methodologies for building relationships

The most common thread throughout the yarns was relationships and the importance of relationship building in learning and teaching, on a broad scale, beyond human society. Locating relationships on this scale as the foundation of an Indigenous learning and teaching practice approach places Indigenist practice in contrast with Western and Anglo-Australian-dominated practice.

Whilst relational learning theory and practice is considered within Western academic discourse, it is not prioritised at the 'front end' of mainstream practice nor promoted in overarching policy (Morrison & Chorba, 2015). From over 20 years experience teaching within universities, I have witnessed the common learning and teaching starting point to be that relative strangers are taught by relative strangers. This is more so now than ever as the move to blended and online learning has gained increasing traction following the Covid-19 pandemic (Dumford & Miller, 2018).

This fundamental difference to how relationship is valued as a learning and teaching starting point presents a major challenge well before any other considerations. When negotiating practice at Nakata's cultural interface, the epistemological and ontological dimensions can be considered and even negotiated via discourse (the development of policy and curriculum). However, the axiological dimension presents a challenge in regard to the significance of relationship making and maintenance, as identified by this research.

Country as Teacher and Process

It is unsurprising that country should feature so prominently in discussions and considerations about First Nations knowledge systems and practices, given that connection to country is commonly associated with First Nations cultures. Country, as simultaneously geographic place, social space and spiritual centre, is the foundation of Indigenous identity and is central to practices of knowledge generation and sharing (Kohen, 2003; Burgess and Morrison, 2020). However, there is still a tendency to include understanding of the significance of country merely as content within Indigenous studies, rather than to recognise the active, sentient nature of country as host and teacher, as identified within all of these 12 yarns. This understanding in Indigenist practice sits in sharp contrast to Western considerations of place in learning and teaching, particularly in regard to place as an active agent. Within the Western models that dominate formal Australian education instituions, place has been largely reduced to a utilitarian concept based on an economically rational location for the infrastructure

required to deliver education (Seawright, 2014). Western knowledge is mainly defined as an intellectual artefact, transferable and translocatable to any physically place, as required. These clear epistemological and ontological differences require deep shifts in the current relationship between Indigenist learning and teaching and the Western system.

Decolonising education for a collaborative approach

The conflicting values and practice approaches in regard to place and Country provide a clear example of the need to decolonise dominant educational institutions. The stark difference in how country is seen and valued by First Nations educators has implications regarding how country is understood in Western educational contexts and is particularly salient for First Nations practitioners attempting to negotiate legitimacy, space and resourcing at the institutional cultural interface. To this end the consideration of the epistemological, ontological and axiological components of the cultural interface, in regard to what and who country is, require a First Nations perspective. In the authors experience, it is unlikely non-Indigenous colleagues within mainstream education settings will have this. Significant difference regarding values and approaches to learning and teaching present the first of many potential challenges at the cultural interface of decision making regarding collaborative education planning and practice with Indigenous peoples (Nakata, 2007a; Yunkaporta, 2009; UN, 2007). If the prevailing institutional structures and systems are culturally fixed in such a way that there is no opportunity for experientially-based Indigenous pedagogical approaches to be established, any process of informed negotiation around practice will be compromised at best, if possible at all, until overarching hegemonic barriers are removed (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Woods, 2016). This speaks to the need for the systematic and cultural changes called for via anti-colonial and decolonising theory and practice discourse (Leroy-Dyer, 2018).

Foundations of Indigenist education practice

An Indigenist education approach places at the front end particular practice commitments that the Western approach considers more often as an ‘add-on’, if at all. These ‘add-ons’ can be attempts to introduce equity to practice or rectify a dominant pedagogical inadequacy. In contrast, these 12 yarns showed consideration of equity from an Indigenous practice perspective to be foundational to an Indigenist practice perspective.

The foundations of Indigenous learning and teaching practices are being ‘re-discovered’ within Western theory and practice, in an attempt to improve outcomes for learners, mirroring Western shifts in broader epistemological and ontological domains, as outlined by Woods and Holscher (2022). Just as ethical considerations are increasingly add-ons to practice, Western approaches are also recognising the significance of relationship building and there is also growing discourse, literature and practice in regard to place-based learning (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bates 2018). From a cultural justice and academic integrity perspective researchers, scholars and education practitioners should be encouraged and supported to develop a sound awareness of Indigenous and Indigenist education approaches so that these sources and existing knowledges that have already refined these practices are recognised and respected.

A foundation in cultural knowledge systems

In terms of culturally defined rules and protocols, yarning participants agreed that anyone involved in facilitating the sharing of Indigenous knowledges at any level should be endorsed to do so through their relationships to other Indigenous knowledge-holders and should be experienced in teaching from that cultural context. This was most specifically highlighted in terms of teachers or facilitators having the right to share culturally-specific knowledge, based on their established relationships with the owners and custodians of that knowledge. This commitment to the recognition of Indigenous knowledge custodianship and working within First Nations rules of knowledge-sharing aligns with an Indigenous standpoint within the research space (Martin 2020; Snow et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Discussions of this nature are more prolific within the institutional research setting than in the learning and teaching setting (Nakata, 2007a).

Participants typically discussed authenticity of process and practice around philosophical and values-based criteria rather than around any specific cultural protocols or practices. This important distinction points to the difference between understanding what more deeply informs visual expressions of culture, as opposed to building assumptions from uninformed observations of publically-available cultural expressions, such as performances, artworks and other physical cultural artefacts. When notions of Indigenous cultural authenticity is imposed from the outside via an ethnocentric and anthropologically inspired gaze (Yunkaporta, 2019; Carlson, 2016; Gupta 2017), they can be provocative, emotive, and offensive, often drawing on cultural ignorance, racist stereotypes, and culturally fossilised imagery. This process becomes even more damaging when members of First Nations communities themselves invoke the power of authenticity over others based on similar criteria (Carlson, 2016). In the authors experience, it is still far more common within mainstream education institutions to present 'First Nations culture' in these latter ways rather than to provide opportunities for First Nations knowledges to be experienced at deeper, more intellectual and philosophical levels, relevant to everyday life. The systems for knowledge sharing and cultural authenticity highlighted by the participants are one way to work towards such deeper opportunities.

Indigenous/ist Pedagogies, Decolonisation and Rights

Moving forward, including Indigenous/ist pedagogies in discussions about systemic decolonisation of education is essential given the colonising project involves the attempted destruction and ongoing prohibition of Indigenous processes and practices. Thus, agreement about, understanding of, and equitable sharing of common ground for Indigenous learning and teaching is vital so that activists, practitioners, and scholars are able to champion Indigenous/ist practices as viable alternatives to colonising practices.

Based on these yarns, inclusion of authentic Indigenous learning and teaching practices and experiences at the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007a) should be authorised and managed by custodians and practitioners of the wisdom and knowledges from which they are derived. This is in concert with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly Article 14 (UN 2007). This highlights the need for formal inclusion of First Nations community involvement and shared governance, which is consistently missing within settler-colonial, institutionally defined and developed administration and practice, particularly in a tertiary setting (Watego, 2021).

Given that the cultural interface is a setting in which knowledge and practice approaches should be negotiated, it is critical that resources and platforms are available to Indigenous practitioners to support such negotiations and that a certain level of knowledge is required by those in authority to be able to competently engage in epistemological, ontological and methodlogical considerations at the cultural interface. Unlike other states within the settler-colonial Anglosphere, such as Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia does not have First Nations controlled organisations that enjoy significant levels of authority over and management of Indigenous education design and delivery, particularly at the tertiary level. Instead, the current situation in Australia sees agents of the settler-colonial state and their institutional practices control the extent to which students and others have access to Indigenous learning and teaching experiences, maintaining colonising practices in education. (Gunstone 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

Limitations

Due to resource limitations, the study was conducted with a convenience sample, somewhat limited by number. However, given their wide representation of diverse cultural backgrounds, twelve participants are considered sufficient to draw themes for a common ground. Further, as with most research that evaluates sensitive social, cultural and/or political matters, there may be a tendency for social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonte, 2020). It is entirely possible that participants may have held opinions during yarning or during feedback on the analysis

that they chose not to share. However, given this group represent First Nations peoples with demonstrated professional commitment to the promotion of Indigenous education, including decolonisation, it is unlikely that reluctance or apathy played a significant part in the consensus outcome. Nevertheless, in guiding the yarns, I employed strategies for limiting bias, such as providing sound information about the study, establishing rapport and asking questions (Bergen and Labonte, 2020).

Further Research

It is recommended that a larger scale project with a more diverse representation of First Nations educators be undertaken to provide further confirmation or challenge to a thesis based on shared beliefs, values and processes amongst First Nations groups. Further to this there should be a more widely considered exploration of how Indigenous-led pedagogies and education experiences can be engaged across the full spectrum of formal education settings in Australia, from early childhood through to postgraduate training. This should consider Indigenous/ist learning and teaching approaches as a key tool to overcome the significant impacts that the colonising project has had on human and non-human society throughout Australia.

Conclusion

From 12 yarns, strong consensus was found among a diverse cohort of First Nations practitioners about what defines contemporary Indigenous learning and teaching process and practice in Australia. Preceding broader shared definitions around themes and contexts is the recognition of Indigenous sociocultural diversity and the rights of First Nations societies to control and manage access to and application of their knowledges. This research provided practice examples that confirmed and further enhanced theory of First Nations pedagogies and practices discussed within existing literature. Of foundational importance to Indigenous learning and teaching practice is the establishment and development of relationships between people and place. There is significant recognition of the intentional use of Country as a place

to facilitate learning and teaching, as a facilitator of learning and teaching itself and an entity with which teachers and learners can develop unique and beneficial learning relationships Country. Learners and teachers are always on First Nations Country and the significance of this exists regardless of the physical setting, including the walls and boundaries of settler-colonial institutions. Indigenous learning and teaching practice is inclusive and does not seek to exclude non-Indigenous participants. The depth of engagement accessed, and development of knowledge gained, is governed by the quality and authenticity of relationships between participants. The experience is process- rather than context-orientated.

With some marginal and emerging exceptions, there are clear contrasts between Indigenous and the dominant Western approaches to learning and teaching across the education spectrum in Australia. Fuelled by existing structurally and systemically racist paradigms within settler-colonial society, including within professional education practice, this situation presents significant challenges for First Nations educators to enjoy their rights to practice within their own sociocultural domains and for the potential of Indigenous pedagogies to challenge and disrupt the ongoing impacts of the colonising project. Any shifts in the dynamics between First Nations and settler-colonial societies in Australia are not dependent on the social policy of the day, but rather the willingness of individuals with varied epistemological, ontological and axiological backgrounds to meet at the cultural interface and equitably negotiate contested spaces based on a shared commitment to human and non-human wellbeing within Australia and beyond.

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