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# INDIGENOUS TEACHING AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

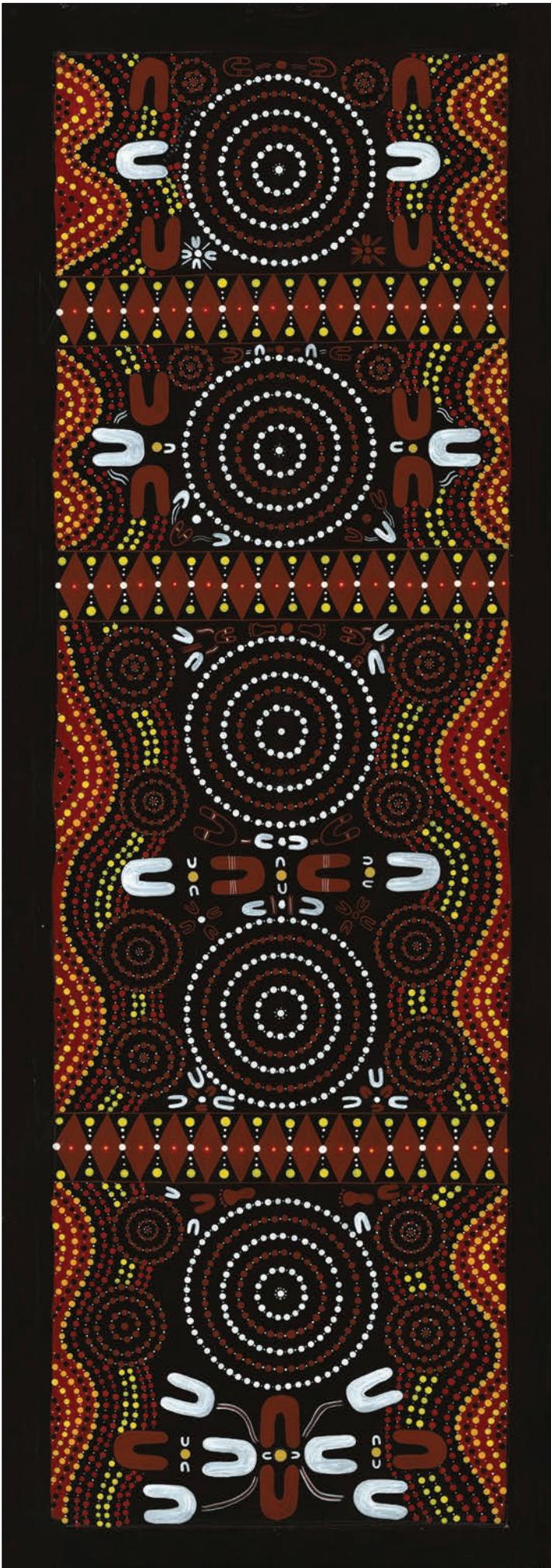
**Research-based  
approaches to teaching  
Indigenous students and  
Indigenous curriculum**

[www.indigenousteaching.com](http://www.indigenousteaching.com)

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### Artist

Tex Skuthorpe is an Aboriginal artist from Goodooga in north western NSW. Tex was privileged to be taught his people's traditional culture by the Noonghaburra elders from Noonghal country. Here he interprets his painting 'Learning to Communicate':

In each of the 26 communities there were completely different ways of communicating, which young people had to learn in order to show respect. Traditionally, the women lived with their husband's community so, within each community, there were women from every one of the other 25 groups. As such, the women taught the young boys and girls how to communicate in each different group. This ensured that when the boys went on their initiation journey, they knew how to show respect to each community they lived with.

Some of the different ways of communicating are depicted in the painting: speaking through a third person, speaking over an object, speaking back to back, speaking back to back and through another person.

[www.tuckandee.com.au](http://www.tuckandee.com.au)

# **Indigenous Teaching at Australian Universities: Research-Based Approaches to Teaching Indigenous Students and Indigenous Curriculum**

This booklet contains a set of research-based approaches for the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and for the teaching of Indigenous curriculum (to mainly non-Indigenous students). The term 'Indigenous Teaching' embraces both of these. The research was funded from a Teaching Fellowship awarded by the Office for Learning & Teaching ([www.olt.gov.au](http://www.olt.gov.au)), formerly the Australian Learning & Teaching Council. This booklet presents selected exemplars but you can find many more at [www.indigenousteaching.com](http://www.indigenousteaching.com).

For the original Fellowship, experienced Indigenous and non-Indigenous university teachers, all identified as exemplary by senior Indigenous colleagues, were interviewed. Some taught Indigenous students in 'Block' programs where academic preparedness varied. Most taught Indigenous curriculum to 'Mainstream' classes where Indigenous students may or may not be present. There is much overlap between the two, as you can see from the 15 Approaches below which came out of the initial data analysis.

## **Fifteen Suggested Approaches to Indigenous Teaching**

### Preparing the learning environment

- Make the classroom a safe environment for learning
  - Understand, anticipate and allay fears
  - Establish relationships of trust and respect
- Show confidence in your own expertise, credibility and authority
- Set high academic and personal standards (and model them yourself)
- Provide scaffolding and support when needed

### In the classroom

- Negotiate emotions in the classroom
- Model dialogue by teaching in pairs/collaboratively
- Locate local Indigenous issues in global contexts
- Get students to question established assumptions and 'facts'

### Learning from experience

- Build relationships with, and connect students to community
  - Take students to community
  - Bring community into the classroom
- Teach students to 'walk in the shoes of others'
- Utilise personal experience
  - Link your own personal experiences to the topic
  - Ask students to relate their personal backgrounds to their current learning
- Encourage student self-awareness
  - Help students to know themselves and their own values better
  - Require students to reflect on their own learning

### Learning and working for the future

- Show students the relevance of learning for future jobs/career
- Be open to reflecting, learning and changing as a teacher
- Be enthusiastic, enjoy your teaching, and have fun!

In the following pages, teachers first describe their approaches to teaching about Indigenous issues, to classes containing mainly non-Indigenous students. It is here that most Indigenous teaching takes place. After that, teachers describe how they approach the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There are commonalities. It is hoped that these research-based exemplars will be useful for anyone working in this vital field.



# TEACHING INDIGENOUS CURRICULUM

## 1. Understand, anticipate and allay fears

*Students of any background may feel trepidation on entering a class where they feel uninformed or out of place. Such fears are real, and so the teacher's task is to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, and a safe space for learning.*

1.1 'One issue is the assumptions the students bring to the course - some have very negative attitudes, very stereotypical. As a teacher you don't know who has those attitudes and who hasn't, so you have to create an environment where they feel able to speak. Some of them have a fear of being brainwashed.'

1.2 'Students need to see that it's not a white-bashing subject. I've seen that done - it just marginalises students... It's important for students to feel safe, relaxed - I drop the whole hierarchical thing in my classes.'

1.3 'The premise, which I've developed over years, is that I make a safe and respectful environment for them, where they feel safe, and where they don't get jumped on for not knowing things. It's the not knowing that creates friction - the fear of not knowing.'

1.4 'I try to get non-Indigenous Australians to be honest about what they think. They often have a heightened sense of political correctness - I try to tell them it is OK to make mistakes. I use my own early field work and the mistakes I made myself, to try to get a sense of reality.'

1.5 'I really try to make it a welcoming thing - I try to break down the idea that you have to be Indigenous to be part of an Indigenous community. We've all got knowledge about this land - so let's just do it!'

## 2. Show confidence in your own expertise, credibility and authority

*Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers can feel - and be - challenged on the question of their credibility. Alongside demonstrating scholarly confidence, teachers will often benefit from acknowledging and drawing upon the expertise of others, including students.*

2.1 'You have to convince students coming in that they have to listen to an Indigenous person teaching them [non-Indigenous subject matter]. This is hard for them to accept. Non-Indigenous students think they are getting ripped off, to have an Indigenous teacher teaching non-Indigenous material or subjects. My expertise is in government, governance.'

2.2 'You need to position yourself in a genuinely authoritative position, in spite of not being an Aboriginal person. They need to see that your view is informed and authoritative... It is important to deal with the difficult questions, such as the Stolen Generation. You can do it and still keep people's respect - and not be seen as a ratbag... I'm an anthropologist, and given that a lot of Aboriginal people see anthropology as an agent of colonisation, I really need to have faith in myself and in my discipline.'

2.3 'I'm conscious that I'm not Indigenous and I would like someone [who is Indigenous] to talk to the students in my Units. This is something I will try to do in future. My field of research is South Pacific Customary Law, and I would like to get some Māori; people involved too. And I will be asking my [Indigenous] students to come back as guest lecturers after they graduate.'

## 3. Negotiate emotions in the classroom

*'Emotional labor' is a major source of stress in Indigenous teaching, especially (but not only) for Indigenous teachers. Non-Indigenous students may resent having to be in your class at all, and may also respond emotionally to the topics. These emotions are understandable but should not dominate a classroom, or be allowed to hurt other people.*

3.1 'If students say something that is inaccurate I will address this by acknowledging common sources of misinformation, and challenge the students to look up other sources of information that offer different perspectives or evidence which disproves what they are saying.'



3.2 'Teaching those students was tougher going. You had to come back and de-brief with your colleagues about what the students there had said... Some students are angry.' [Asked how she coped with it] 'Going back to the class, I try to act happy and optimistic, as if what happened the week before hasn't fazed me. I don't want them to see I've been unnerved. I still say to them: "What do you think?" You have to engage them.'

3.3 'I really like those old-fashioned seminar presentations - a verbal paper and a written paper afterwards. It generates enormous conversation in tutorials. Students will collect different readings on the same topic as each other - this creates tensions, and conversations. They are rarely silent. I've had to time them ...otherwise one or two will get fiery and dominate the conversation.'

3.4 'If someone says something stereotypical, I put it out to the other students to think about, rather than take it on myself. Other students will respond, but they need a comfortable space to feel free to do so. I always try to respond with empathy: "I can see where you are coming from, why you might think that". I acknowledge there is some legitimacy to their views.'

#### 4. Model dialogue by teaching in pairs/collaboratively

*A collaborative approach, involving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, is often effective, and appropriate, signalling the value of Indigenous perspectives. Above all, co-teaching enriches learning for students in contested areas of knowledge.*

4.1 'The three of us have permission to speak of different things - quite a lot of things, between us - but we cannot all speak of the same things, and in fact we sometimes disagree with each other, in front of students. We deliberately model this, so students can learn from it.'

4.2 'The questioning by one of us goes on while the other one is talking about the content, in a kind of meta-cognitive way, so X will intervene to say: "The reason Y is saying that, is ...". The use of this "critical meta-narrative" means that students develop the ability to reflect on their own practice. We model the possibility that you can have normal relations.'

4.3 'X sat in my lectures, right up front, and we would interact from time to time. She would interject, and sometimes we'd have very clear differences of opinion. It was good for students to see that you could have differences of opinion with Aboriginal people and it does not mean disrespect. Students can see, there and then, that there's a debate to be had. Also, it is really patronising to Aboriginal people not to debate them. I've known X for a long time - it helps.'

4.4 'I teach in collaboration with my Aboriginal colleagues - never on my own... It's very important that Indigenous people should be doing the teaching. They don't need to do it all, but they need to be prominent, they need to be in charge. For the students - it's great for them to see that there's a prominent Indigenous teacher leading that.'

#### 5. Locate local Indigenous issues in global contexts

*Most universities aspire to ideals of global citizenship and/or internationalised perspectives for their graduates. You can internationalise and Indigenous your curriculum at the same time.*

5.1 'My interest is in looking at global Indigenous struggles... I attempt to get students to see how Indigenous issues arise in other contexts, and how they get resolved - or not - in places where there are large Indigenous populations dominating the political culture. It's important for people to see that Indigenous people are not always marginalised.'

5.2 'There's always an Indigenous issue, it's raised every week. I think the Western world has messed up the environment and so we need to look at Indigenous peoples' approaches for solutions. That means sharing, thinking outside the square ... There is also an ethical dimension, about inequities. I'd like to put all students on a path of becoming global citizens.'

5.3 'It's not about us and them - it's not focused only on Australia. We look at global Indigenous issues, we do comparative analyses and how different forms of Indigeneity occur all over the world - but there are also similarities. It's often a real eye-opener to the students.'



5.4 'They come away with a broader knowledge of colonisation - with international perspectives on colonisation. For example, we study reggae in Jamaica and the issues with how it developed. They come away with a broad focus.'

## 6. Get students to question established assumptions and 'facts'

*In addition to strategies for dealing with students' controversial attitudes, teachers need to plan the curriculum so that your students will be led to do the questioning themselves.*

6.1 'I try to challenge students to see beyond the mythology. They often come with kitchen table prejudices in their heads. When they are confronted with material, documents showing that the world is otherwise, along with notions of race, colonisation- things usually start to shift. There are some remarkable transformations - I had a student [who] was very open about her family background and their views of Aboriginal people, but her views have shifted remarkably.'

6.2 'We do stuff on Captain Cook - we do the Hawaiian stuff on him being seen as the god Lono, and then we look at how he figures in Indigenous stories. So the same material can be used to meet the needs of different groups.'

6.3 'I always have some kind of reflexive task, for example, a letter from a primitive artifact to a museum curator, challenging the curator on why the artifact is being called "primitive". Sometimes the students have to put together their own museum collection, classify objects as to whether they are "primitive" or not - and then justify that decision to the group.'

6.4 'I'm always giving them facts, but [also] always pushing them to make distinctions. You could call it "de-romanticising" - let's look at Aboriginal people as people who are people, who make choices, so we don't just see them as the antidote for our own Western materialism.'

## *Students come with kitchen table prejudices in their heads*

## 7. Build relationships with, and connect students to community

*You can bring students and community together by taking students on field trips (7.1), or bringing in guest lecturers from the 'real world' (7.2). In Indigenous teaching, the concept of 'community' has a special resonance and can lead to rich student learning, but relationships of trust, and ethical processes, are essential. Media can also be useful here.*

### 7.1 Take students to community

7.1.1 'This course is hands-on; it includes field trips, where the students meet community people and learn about cultural heritage and land. Because of my contacts I can take them down to community. That really helps - the students can see I'm connected. And it is good for me because it means employment opportunities for my mob.'

7.1.2 'It was half archaeology, half history. It was done in a Block, an 18-day intensive, with a field trip of 3 days. We took them to Budja Budja Country at Halls Gap. The community took them to rock art sites, they gave them a bush tucker lunch, and then the Community Manager spoke to us about contemporary Aboriginal issues and problems... The liaison with the Budja Budja came out of my research - so it all bent back on that relationship - it was wonderful.'

7.1.3 'We also go to Aboriginal organisations like the Koori Heritage Trust, and teach in their spaces. It's great to immerse the students in Aboriginal environments.'

7.1.4 'Site visits, for example to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Aboriginal Art Centres, talking to Elders - it's community immersion... So it's not just about theory - it's also about the realities... They are powerful, holistic learning experiences. Otherwise, students don't have those real-life exposures - and that would be a lost opportunity.'



7.1.5 'Students generally think of Aboriginal culture as art, but I get them to read about art and land. I take them to the Art Gallery, and the Indigenous curator walks them through and talks about art movements that ran in parallel with Indigenous political activism.'

## 7.2 Bring community into the classroom

7.2.1 'I organise a public forum on a particular issue; it might be the justice system, or family violence. Some speakers are Aboriginal. The audience, including students, can ask questions. The students come back later, after tea, and deconstruct everything they've heard. The students get a lot out of it. It's a way of bringing people in the field, into contact with people in the community. It also brings Aboriginal people into the University, it encourages access. It's comfortable for them because there are a bunch of other Aboriginal people there.'

7.2.2 'Broadly, in Aboriginal Studies - film is a really important driver to represent the diversity of Aboriginal voices, their geographical locations, their language groups... Film is a powerful pedagogical tool - but you need to cue it right, so it doesn't go on and they get bored... One Aboriginal voice [the teacher's] isn't enough.'

7.2.3 'I give a lecture and then show a video. It may show Aboriginal people speaking, [so] it makes up for not having guest speakers, as my department provides limited funds for guest speakers. In my subject I use 8 or 9 videos with Aboriginal voices, so that is quite a lot.'

## 8. Teach students to 'walk in the shoes of others'

*Students can learn to engage with perspectives new to them by 'walking in the shoes of others'. You can do this via role play, immersion and simulations - whether over a semester, involving student research; or just in a single session. Careful preparation is always needed.*

8.1 'My role is to put them in different shoes - not just the shoes of an Indigenous person, but say, the shoes of a curator wondering "How do I add to my Indigenous collection?", or the shoes of someone in the audience of an Indigenous hip-hop gig.'

8.2 'Increasingly, I use role plays in class. We might work on fishing rights over a lake, and the Indigenous students are asked to play the role of government officials, and non-Indigenous students have to take on Indigenous roles.'

8.3 'We have just done a very rigorous component on engaging with the media - it was immersion, with role play, such as being interrogated by a journalist, and how to manage that. It's Performance Space teaching.'

8.4 'I run an online role-play, where students walk in the shoes of the colonisers, and of the colonised... In the last class they enact a range of roles... That's powerful. Students respond very positively, they acknowledge they have learnt something. Students correspond with one another... they get different information depending on their role, they get involved in issues which are still with us today. It's a bit of an "immersion" project, based on diaries, Royal Commission transcripts, letters to the newspapers. They get a personal engagement with the material - it's not just history as a set of secondary documents.'

## *We immerse students in Aboriginal environments*

## 9. Utilise personal experience

*In Indigenous teaching across many disciplines, the personal backgrounds and experiences of both teachers and students are often drawn upon to encourage critical reflection.*

9.1 'Some Indigenous lecturers foreground their personal experiences in their teaching - and I use that sometimes - but I don't make it a focus of my teaching. By nature I'm a private person. It relates to my own Aboriginality... Having said this, I will talk about some [more personal] things that are useful for them to know, and I'm willing to share that.'



9.2 'My connection to community is critical to how I teach - and that's what we should be promoting. It's my philosophy - and it's how I live it - and then share it.'

9.3 'We need more reflexivity as researchers - particularly as white Australians working in Indigenous fields. I show myself to be a foolish naïve character in the field. I talk about my own upbringing in rural Victoria, where it was really racist. It's making an archetype of yourself - so students can see a person who's gone through a transformation. It is anecdotal, I tell my own stories. It encourages people to do the same.'

9.4 'I hope that one outcome is that they've been able to meet me and engage in a safe environment with at least one person who has an Indigenous background: Jilda, who's Kamilaroi, is like a text... They can ask questions, they can say things other people might think are silly... One thing they can't say, then, is that they've never met an Indigenous person.'

## 10. Encourage student self-awareness

*Reflection, a widely-used tool for learning, fits well with the transformative agenda behind much Indigenous teaching. Students can be asked to (re)assess their own values (10.1); and to reflect on their own learning pathways (10.2). Assessing these tasks will get students' attention.*

10.1 Help students to know themselves and their own values better

10.1.1 'You can't assume any prior substantive knowledge - which you normally would, in a Masters program. Not only that, but the knowledge they do have is partial ... So basically my "program" is to ... spin them around 360 degrees, so that they understand the issue is not an Aboriginal problem, it's a problem of our society. Transformative pedagogy: that's my project.'

10.1.2 'I might have a standard essay, but I also ask them to be subjective. The students run a Reconciliation Learning Circle for a semester. I use material from the Council for Reconciliation, where they have reflective questions, such as: "How would you respond if your children were taken"? I get them to engage at the level of Self, not just to focus on the Other.'

10.1.3 'I want students to be engaged in topics relevant to them - not some abstract learning. It's about them. I think a lot of them get a different insight into their identities as Australians. [But] we had to do a de-briefing session once. It's emotional - and that's tricky.'

10.2 Require students to reflect on their own learning

10.2.1 'I get them to do reflection too - they have to write a letter to a friend telling them what they've learned in the unit.'

10.2.2 'I try to get them to learn about themselves... By challenging their notions of where they get their information from - the media, or whatever - and how they value it. When you're teaching cultural competency in Medicine, the first thing is - you have to know yourself.'

## 11. Show students the relevance of learning for future jobs/career

*Some non-Indigenous undergraduates - and their parents - may wonder where Indigenous Studies will take them. Bringing in former students as guest speakers is one useful strategy.*

11.1 'Careers - a lot of them want to know what they can do with Aboriginal knowledge. So I have guest speakers - students who come back, and who can explain what they've done with it, in their careers. Students are usually not sure how it will benefit them in the workplace - and I imagine that's what their parents think too. It's amazing how many students are influenced by their parents... I get my guest speakers to talk about career prospects, so it's about learning about things on their own, not just following their parents' advice.'

11.2 'I've had occasional guest speakers. They tend to be young graduates working in the field - they are non-Indigenous. They are young exemplars, out of Honours, who talk about the balance of practical realities and what I had tried to get them focused on.'

11.3 'If you just tell them Aboriginal health is bad, they get disempowered, helpless. But if you relate it to their skills - and these students have an excellent set of skills: empathy, communication - then they can link [it to] those skills in ways that can make an improvement.'



## 12. Be open to reflecting, learning and changing as a teacher

*Being a 'reflective practitioner' is the mark of a true professional. Many teachers in this often challenging field are candid about their own personal transformations over the years.*

12.1 [After completing a course in university teaching] 'I moved away from challenging racist students directly, to encouraging the whole class to think differently about an issue. Students have to come to their conclusions themselves. I try to focus on the good of the whole group rather than picking on one person.'

12.2 'The research comes out of my teaching, very much so. I started teaching, then I thought: "I need to meet Aboriginal people", so I started researching. I began with Aboriginal boxers, and went on from there. So it was my teaching first, then research, and they've bent back on each other ever more since then.'

12.3 'My lecture notes aren't notes. They're mostly pictures. If I used notes, students would just write everything down. We talk as much as possible. I show them pictures, and get them to talk about "culture", and what that means. I didn't always do this, I moved towards it.'

12.4 'I express to them how [moral dilemmas] confound me, I put that to them: "Why haven't we anthropologists done better with Indigenous health?" It gets the students thinking that we might not be very good at what we think we are good at.'

## 13. Be enthusiastic, enjoy your teaching, and have fun!

*Using humour comes naturally to some teachers. For others, humour is a conscious strategy to defuse classroom tensions. Learning should be enjoyable - for students and for teachers.*

13.1 'Another strategy is to use humour. With the Education students we often laugh and joke in class.'

13.2 'I use humour, so they see me as approachable.'

13.3 'I think they have fun - we do role plays, field trips...I've never had anyone say it was boring! And at the end they feel engaged.'

13.4 'I get satisfaction out of my students. They teach me heaps. I love them. Sometimes you think you'll have a fight again - and then you'll get a semester which is bliss - where they're eating it up.'

### HOW MIGHT THESE APPROACHES BE USED TO DEVELOP QUALITY INDIGENOUS TEACHING?

- Get teachers to discuss whether the Approaches suggested here are simply 'good teaching', or whether something extra seems required in the field of Indigenous teaching – and why.
- Ask teachers to rate themselves on how well they think they are currently doing in relation to each Approach, and where they might do better.
- Encourage teachers to read the teaching exemplars; come up with their own strategies; then workshop those ideas with a wider group.
- Provide an Action Plan template where teachers can record any new strategies they plan to implement in their own disciplines.



# TEACHING ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS

## 1. Establish relationships of trust and respect

*With Indigenous students it is often vital to put extra effort into establishing relationships of trust and respect. The need to build trust is highlighted by the often tragic experiences of Indigenous communities during Australia's colonial past, and by the fact that Indigenous communities - and students - remain directly affected by those legacies today.*

1.1 'Sometimes you've got people walking into the classroom who are wounded from things that have happened to them and to their families - it's like an iceberg, you can't see it. You have to bide your time, you have to be kind... So it's trying to juggle all of that. And I believe a lot of heart has to come into your teaching.'

1.2 'We have students from the Daly River and the Northern Territory - they're not exactly loud in projecting their voice. But at the same time, the things they know are integral to the learning of the whole group, so we have to be mindful that we don't lose voices. Some students have a stronger inner dialogue than an outer one. We do quite a lot of one-to-one teaching and mentoring with those students. And you have to acknowledge the non-verbal. With our Indigenous students, if you put them on the spot, that can result in a very short response, like - "It's OK", or "Yeah, good". Students are assessed on their contributions in class - this is where the teacher's awareness of diversity kicks in.'

1.3 'In teaching Koori kids, it's the relationship that is crucial, the trust. There's no hope without it. Without it, you're a shot duck, dead in the water.'

## 2. Show confidence in your own expertise, credibility and authority

*The question of who is entitled to speak, and on which topics, is always a sensitive one for Indigenous peoples. As a teacher, you need to project professional confidence, but in doing so, you also need to respect students' views.*

2.1 'With every new group we go through each person: "Where I'm from..." "My family..." - and it's very personal, not detached. Then I give them a spiel: "We're all here and we're going to share our own knowledge. No one is better than anyone else".'

2.2 'If Indigenous students say: "My Grandma says this" - how can the academy judge? But I think it is important to be able to stand outside our own culture and history, and talk about it critically, analytically'.

2.3 'It's tough... Elders in the classroom. You've got the concurrent knowledge systems running. You've got the high-level educators in the classroom - in their communities they have the knowledge - and then there's me, the lecturer, who's 20 years younger. It takes a lot of skill to manage that, so I try to incorporate their knowledge in the teaching. I think about my learning outcomes. I try to get through the content, do the scaffolding for the assessments, and at the same time give them the respect they deserve.'

*Without trust, you're a shot duck, dead in the water*



### 3. Set high academic and personal standards (and model them yourself)

*Standards should never be lowered for any group of students, including Indigenous. Insisting on standards, however, does not rule out flexibility on say timelines. Indigenous students in some programs may be academically under-prepared, so teachers will need to support such students in achieving their academic potential.*

3.1 'I think it's important that Indigenous students reach the same standards and therefore feel confident and can be proud of their achievements - knowing they are equal to other students... The challenge for teachers is to design strategies to enable Indigenous student learners to reach the standard, come up to the level - this is in the context of those students being adult, mature age, "second chance learners".'

3.2 'Everyone has to do a presentation, and although [the Indigenous students] are sitting there scratching themselves with anxiety, I try to be "fair but firm"... and I model what I want them to do; be on time (I'm never late); be prepared - so they know not to let people down.'

3.3 'About that hoary old subject of deadlines - I always accepted that students would find it hard to meet them. Students rarely met them - I gave them the time they needed to get the work done - without penalty. Students need detailed feedback - then if they haven't met the criteria they can resubmit.'

### 4. Provide scaffolding and support when needed

*Due to the non-traditional academic pathways some Indigenous students take in reaching university, 'scaffolding' is often needed. Support may be needed outside class, since issues like chronic ill-health, and community needs, affect Indigenous students more than most. Developing your understanding of Indigenous histories and social realities is important.*

4.1 'I try to be encouraging, I listen respectfully to students' questions... With a subject like anatomy, I'm careful to decode the language - to teach them about the terminology. I make sure I orientate the diagrams - "This is a diagram of ... It's from this angle..." What seems easy to me is not, for new students. I've developed some Plain English notes - it's scaffolding.'

4.2 'Scaffolding is a big thing for me. They are only here 4 times a year - and I only have them for 4 days for each subject. Then they have tasks that they take back. The problems occur when they go back - so I scaffold everything for them...I remind them that they can ring me any time, and talk toll-free.'

4.3 'Criticism is a big thing. We call it "feedback" but it all needs to be softened. Sometimes they take it particularly hard - like with the plagiarism stuff, they've had lecturers before who haven't picked it up - and suddenly there's this person criticising them.'

4.4 'Note-taking - it's a challenge for people new to learning, especially in my area where there's a lot of terminology. I spend time on process skills, for example on looking up glossaries - and I give formal feedback on that - so, some teaching is on academic skills.'

### 5. Negotiate emotions in the classroom

*When encountering Indigenous subject matter, Indigenous students can experience strong emotions such as anger or pain. In anticipating such emotions, prevention is better than the cure. Even so, unexpected responses can arise, and have to be managed carefully.*

5.1 'I've taught in contexts of the Stolen Generations et cetera. At one level it's important to set out the consequences of those policies and so on... But at the same time, if you're teaching Indigenous students, you have to acknowledge their responses will be different. And so I say to my Indigenous students: "You may find this material disturbing", and "You don't have to attend this lecture". It's good pedagogy to recognise these things - that knowledge is not all going to be consumed in the same way.'

5.2 'When I first met one of the older students, she asked if we could change the seating so the chairs weren't in rows. It reminded her of her bad experiences at school. So I moved them into a circle and afterwards I asked her if it was OK for her. She said yes - she had tears in her eyes. She also said she feels intimidated when lecturers stand or walk around. She had to feel trust in me in order to be able to say what she said.'



## 6. Utilise personal experience

*In Indigenous teaching, the personal backgrounds and experiences of both teachers and students are often drawn upon to encourage critical reflection.*

6.1 'We draw on students' parents' issues, including parents who may have been migrants from other countries. We ask students to think about: "What knowledge did your parents have, that you inherited?" We use this to get them to go back to the true history of this country.'

6.2 'I walk in, we spend time on asking how they are - it can be personal things, how they are feeling. I try to link new material back to previous material we have done. I try to use learners' own experiences. I use advance organisers with them. I demonstrate ways in which they are already masterful, and I use their own experiences.'

6.3 'If a discussion is rolling, I tend to let it go, even if it is a bit off the topic. I figure the kids need a chance to open up, to share their stories, so I let that happen, I push it along. For many of them, no one has ever been interested in hearing what they have to say.'

## 7. Show students the relevance of learning for future jobs/careers

*Some students may be mature Indigenous people who already have full-time jobs in their own communities and are hoping to relate their learning to those professional jobs. Helping all your students link learning to future career goals is just good teaching.*

7.1 'I get the [Indigenous] students to do a Powerpoint... I tell them: "Imagine someone comes in wanting to do research in your community - what would you tell your employer?" The students tell me this has been really useful for them... So it's linking learning outcomes and assessment - but also relating assessment to what they're doing in their communities. The students say their employers are blown away when the students say: "You haven't thought about Ethics." So they are developing the confidence not only to know it, but to say it.'

7.2 'Most [of my] Indigenous students are in schools - so I expose them to things they can take back with them. I expose them to new knowledges and new resources. It gives them power. Doing this also encourages them as teachers to keep up to date with the latest technology. The Aboriginal Education Officers don't normally feel very confident in say, staff meetings in their school, so I give them skills that will enable them to gain that confidence.'

7.3 'You have to open their eyes to the idea that you can change the world, not just yourself. This is important for Indigenous students, who are so often seen as victims.'

## 8. Be open to reflecting, learning and changing as a teacher

*In Indigenous teaching, academics need to be reflexive and open to change - in attitudes as well as in teaching practices. Exemplary practitioners constantly reflect on, and evaluate their own practice in order to improve it.*

8.1 'You can't teach Indigenous students without knowing Indigenous history. But it's also about recognising your own values.'

8.2 'I've learnt to totally suspend judgement. I've learnt that there's always an underlying story behind why people do what they do. Everything needs to be done compassionately... But we also need to have the guts to stand up to some people. So you may have to suspend judgment - but you also have to be ready to make a judgement if needed.'

8.3 'When I first arrived [here] I was paralysed by fear in case I made a blunder... Then I went to a Diversity conference and realised that if I taught them the same as everyone else, I wasn't recognising their learning needs. But it's not about their cultural needs. This sounds like I am not recognising them as Indigenous people who may have different needs based on culture, but I think good teachers recognise these needs and accommodate them in teaching.'



8.4 'A lot of academics make assumptions that they have to teach Aboriginal students in a certain kind of way. Fifteen years ago, when I went to teach in the Pitjantjatjara community, I had those assumptions, until I found that it didn't work to teach that way. On the question of: "Is there an Aboriginal learning style?" - the answer was: "Highly questionable".'

8.5 'I've looked at my own learning process with my own parents and family... My mother is non-Indigenous and my father is Indigenous, and the synthesis of the two has helped me develop my approach to my own teaching... As I go on, I look at my own teaching to see if this worked or not, and I do ongoing checks.'

## *It's about recognising your own values*

### **9. Be enthusiastic, enjoy your teaching, and have fun!**

*Indigenous teaching is often deeply satisfying but it has its challenges. Given this, it is especially important that you remember to enjoy your teaching, and that students do too.*

9.1 'I think my classes are pretty fun, so I hope they get enjoyment out of it. I hope I give them practical strategies. There's no handbook for Indigenous teaching so I try to give them the tools. So even if it's just a Welcome to Country that they have to organise, I give them links ...The students seem happy enough.'

9.2 'I'm evangelical (though it's partly acting). I'm enthusiastic about learning. I want them to learn to want to learn. I don't want them to be over-awed by everything there is to learn at uni, but I do show them what's there. If they're in a school I want them to be passionate too. There's no point being a teacher if you're not.'

9.3 'I love teaching... it is such a fascinating area. When I am well prepared for a class I go in feeling really excited - knowing what I am going to share with the students.'

### **SO WHAT ARE THE REAL KEYS TO EFFECTIVE INDIGENOUS TEACHING?**

Based on the research underpinning the exemplars presented here, two key concepts seem to emerge as fundamental to how we approach teaching and learning in this field:

- In teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – and also in working effectively with Indigenous colleagues – the key issue is building Relationships.
- In teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, to students mostly not from Indigenous backgrounds, the key issue is encouraging Critical Reflection.



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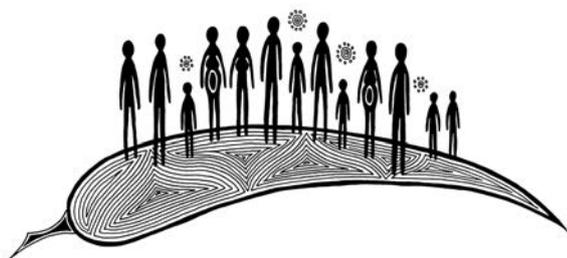
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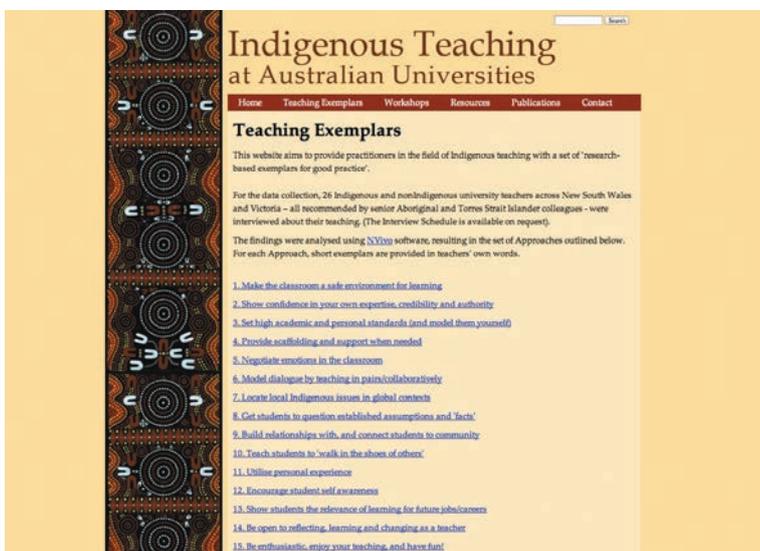
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## Website: Indigenous Teaching at Australian Universities

On this website you can find many more exemplars from university staff engaged in Indigenous teaching, plus their institutional affiliations; resources to support your teaching and assessment, including materials from two national Forums; useful links and published research; a glossary of key terms; a list of all Indigenous centres in Australian universities; and a full report on the Teaching Fellowship.

[www.indigenousteaching.com/](http://www.indigenousteaching.com/)



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