

ICTs and Indigenous pedagogy: Techniques of resistance in chat rooms

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Abstract

This paper draws upon the ideas and scholarship encapsulated by a core unit at QUT in 'Indigenous Education'. This unit was developed and written by Indigenous staff in the university's Oodgeroo Unit and taken up for delivery for the first time in 2003. Staff in Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) were approached towards the end of the writing of this subject to develop a unique online environment that would support the philosophical and pedagogical tenets of this program of study. In 2004, a chat room was introduced to allow students an additional space for their reflections and learning over the semester. This paper suggests that the risks and resistances modelled by both the teaching staff and the learning environment are key factors in assisting pre-service teachers to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander knowledges in their own teaching for the benefit of all students. By undertaking a conversational analysis of chat room support sessions, observations can be made on: (i) the impact and efficacy of ICT use in assisting student reflection, provocation and critique, and (ii) future directions of research investigating the interface between Indigenous pedagogies in education and ICTs.

Keywords

information communication technologies, Indigenous education, cultural studies

Cultural interfaces⁶ and ICT

When [Indigenous knowledge] employs methods and instruments of Western science, which involves fragmentation across categories of information [and] isolation ... it begins to lay itself open to the same criticisms of 'Western science', which has largely failed in development contexts ... It becomes not embedded in local meanings and contexts but separated from its original context – an entity to be studied, worked on, developed, integrated, transferred and ultimately changed to fit another.

(Nakata, 2002, p. 5)

We have commenced this paper with Nakata's thoughts on the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems in mainstream contexts — of which ICT is a particularly powerful one — to caution against reading this paper without keeping as a primary consideration the fact that some aspects of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' (Nakata, 2000; Martin, 2005) may be transformed by the very act of incorporating these complex systems into Western contexts. The authors of this paper are speaking from different cultural contexts also, so there is a particular interface already established that the following discussions need to be interpreted through. Jean Phillips is an Indigenous woman who is also an academic and seeks to have Indigenous knowledge systems maintain their dynamism even when operating through Western contexts, and Greg Winslett is a non-Indigenous man who works as a Learning Designer assisting academics to design online teaching environments and episodes.

⁶ Nakata defines the 'Cultural Interface' as the place which conditions the lives as Indigenous people; a space within which Indigenous peoples are often forced to operate; a space where Indigenous peoples also make particular choices about what to accommodate, resist or reject. It is a space that acts on, through and sometimes against Indigenous peoples and one that is traversed daily with an awareness that may not be as obvious to non-Indigenous people (2005, pp. 9–11). Readers are urged to read Nakata's paper *Indigenous knowledge and the cultural interface* for his important analysis of these complex issues.

'Ways of knowing' Indigenous people

Langton informs us that the knowledge *about* Indigenous peoples arises through a variety of ways:

Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue. It is a field of inter-subjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation.

(Langton, 1993, p. 33)

The pre-service teacher education subject which was used as the foundation for the chat room was developed through an understanding that although it is likely that non-Indigenous students would come into the unit with little day-to-day experiences with Indigenous peoples, they already held 'knowledge' *about* Indigenous peoples as gleaned through their own schooling, the media and lounge-room conversations. The teaching and learning processes employed were designed, in part, to break down these learned 'ways of knowing' Indigenous peoples and to ensure that the connections between how Australia's colonial history has conditioned all Australians to see themselves in particular ways. Often, for non-Indigenous peoples this conditioning takes place without the integration of what Reynolds (1995) calls the 'other side of the frontier'.

Further, Langton (1993, p. 33) sees that there are three broad categories into which these inter-subjectivities are placed:

- Category 1: The experience of the Aboriginal person interacting with other Aboriginal people.
- Category 2: The stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people.
- Category 3: Where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people enter into a dialogue with each other that produces mutual, testing models in order to find a space for mutual comprehension.

To date, the institutions within which we work have mostly positioned, and contributed to the knowledge creation about Indigenous peoples via the first and second categories, with notable exceptions. Scholars are only now just beginning to take on the more arduous and less comforting modes of enquiry required of a deep intersubjective discovery of what our cultures mean independent of, and in interaction with, each other (Phillips, 2003, p. 1).

If categories one and two are used as the main informant for designing curriculum in Indigenous education, quite often the result will be to develop in students an expectation that Indigenous people are a problem to be 'fixed', for example, 'How do I teach Indigenous learners?' — with all of the associated deficit model implications. This paper seeks to explore the role of an online environment that supports a learning design that centres the approach suggested by Category 3, but is underpinned by the complex systems of knowledge and Indigenous pedagogy arising from Category 1.

The dangers in seeking to define an Indigenous pedagogy are in the adoption of a differential model which seeks to identify how Indigenous pedagogy may differ from Western approaches on the one hand or to only focus on what is shared between the approaches on the other. Differences do exist — highly important approaches to teaching and learning that serve to subvert the assumptions embedded within a Western approach. While the similarities serve to reinforce the flexibility and usefulness of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' in adapting to spaces outside of their own cultural frameworks, demonstrating the knowledge held by Indigenous people in 'traversing the cultural interface' (Nakata, 2002, p. 9) and how the standpoints developed as a consequence reveal often hidden elements of Western 'ways of knowing'. It is these hidden elements that need to be 'tested' through mutual dialogue and enquiry.

This paper focuses on the online environment and the ways in which Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy as conceptualised and operationalised in the abovementioned core unit in Indigenous studies.

What is Indigenous standpoint pedagogy?

Mutual dialogue and contestation of accepted ways of knowing Indigenous people and knowledges needs to be about repositioning Indigenous knowledge and students' perceptions of that knowledge from notions of 'disadvantage' or 'equity' to genuinely embed Indigenous knowledge at the core of the curriculum. It is this understanding of teaching and learning that provides the platform of 'Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy' (ISP), the inherently political, reformative, relational and deeply personal approach that is located in the chaos of colonial and cultural interfaces (Phillips, Whatman, Hart, & Winslett, 2005). This re-location will create spaces for Indigenous knowledge within existing and new curricula while allowing the consequences of this centralising to be interrogated.

ISP fundamentally acknowledges and embeds Indigenous community participation in the development and teaching of Indigenous standpoints and perspectives and is a multifaceted process. It is substantially, but not solely, concerned with ‘Indigenous perspectives in education’, and is not just a ‘product’, such as a single subject like the one discussed in this paper.

Deliberate pedagogical decisions are made with ISP to confront the narrowness of the dimensions of Western meaning making in learning in Indigenous studies. Because ISP pedagogy in this sense is multi-dimensional, multi-directional it allows for independent and collective movements where understandings are designed to spiral rather than operate in a linear sequence of acquiring skills and knowledges. By holding at its core a set of questions that are persistently re-visited, discussed and explored, ISP challenges the notion of contingency learning, pre-requisite knowledge and linearity. Exposing the ‘knowledge’ that is ready held *about* Indigenous people creates a personal starting point which provides the opportunity for students to take personal responsibility for their learning. This knowledge is interrogated rather than being positioned as something that is known from the start, and back to which students will inevitably be lead if the very frameworks through which they have developed and are understood are not disrupted through Indigenous standpoints on the ‘knowledge’. Utilising Indigenous pedagogical approaches allows for *and* creates resistance while providing the necessary freedom for unexplored assumptions about Self and Other to emerge.

Risks and resistances

A teaching approach that problematises the very environment in which it operates requires a radically different approach than the narrow, outcome driven program which seeks to measure only knowledge and skills acquisition. To provide opportunities for learners to explore the cultural interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, it is important to raise more questions than answers and to equip students with the reflexivity to authorise themselves to not only ask questions, but to recognise that the journey has no particular end point or closure just like the cultural interfaces through which they are being invited to operate.

The paradigm shift being considered here, then may involve a redefinition of the whole field of post compulsory teacher education, in which the social construction of knowledge takes places across a diversity of sites in which learning might be differentiated, collaborative, contested and characterised by uniqueness.

(Gale, 2003)

This approach requires risks from both teaching staff and students: risks of subverting the much adopted ‘teacher as expert’ and also risks for students to engage in a deep critical analysis of the characteristics of their own cultural assumptions.

Risks of this magnitude, especially when targeted toward a first year core subject, understandably generate student resistances.

The following discussion is based on the premise that certain *regimes of truth* (Foucault, 1980) are constructed and contested in discursive exchanges. These exchanges — as artefacts of social life — have been transformed by new communication technologies, providing new ways of sequencing, delivering and interrogating learning environments and episodes (Fairclough, in McHoul, 2001). Of particular interest to this paper is the journey undertaken by both an instructor and a small group of students operating within a chat room environment.

Indigenous standpoint pedagogy operating online

The requirement of ISP was for an online teaching approach that avoided the low levels of cognitive engagement (Oliver, 2003), and instead sought to provide a space which assisted student interrogation of the deeply entrenched colonial frameworks that can characterise ‘Indigenous education’ as delivered within a tertiary institution. As Downey and Hart (2005, p. 51) explain: ‘education and schooling can not be separated from the history of place, space, time and meaning ... the history of civilising, Christianising, integrating and assimilating has had a profound effect on Indigenous people’. This colonial process has also had a profound effect on non-Indigenous people, but with entirely different outcomes. Where Indigenous people are now operating through and from the margins (and sometimes this is a *conscious* choice), non-Indigenous ‘beliefs and practices are promoted as the natural order of how Indigenous education works’ (2005, p. 51). Embedded in the technological design of the online learning environment was our genuine desire to make students re-think everything about ‘knowledge acquisition’ (Phillips et al., 2005, p. 10).

This deliberate method of interacting with technology facilitated even deeper student learning outcomes as required in the subject. Chat room sessions were characterised by the following elements (as reported in Duncan, Phillips, & Winslett, 2003).

- The site structure operates on an metaphorical level. Students are provided with two pathways to accessing unit related material and activity spaces. In this metaphor, the notion that the method of presenting learning environments is just as important as the content is central to the design (De Young & Monroe, 1996, p. 171). The gravity of these metaphors is used as a discussion trigger in tutorial sessions.
- The two pathways are described as ‘object oriented’ and ‘narrative entry’. In the ‘object oriented’ interface hyperlinks are nouns, and the course material is presented as a linear progression through the course content. Online learning activities are delivered as an adjunct to the practice of providing access to readings and unit related administrative detail. The ‘narrative entry’ disrupts this method of access by presenting learning resources and content via an image of Australia with Indigenous linguistic borders behind a spiral graphic. Each node on the spiral links to a short narrative that positions the lecture content and theme. Embedded within the narrative are the links to unit related readings and materials.
- Irrespective of entry path selected, students are presented with a task orientation that requires them to reflect on the 6 key questions that lie at the heart of the subject. Via private, online notepads, students are required to respond to certain provocative triggers about culture construction, sovereignty and identity. These entries, only viewable by the student and the teaching team were used to inform tutorial and lecture sessions.

Chat room sessions were scheduled weekly as an ‘opt in’ for students wishing to discuss the weekly tutorials, lectures and unit readings in more depth. The following items are offered as observations made by the chat room moderator on the dynamics, possibilities and pitfalls of using ICTs to assist pre-service teachers to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in their own teaching for the benefit of all students.

Identity management: Notions of identity are complex and are mediated by a wide range of visible and invisible factors, constructions and conditions. A critical component of ISP is the requirement that students interrogate their own culture constructions and the impact that these constructions may have in their future role as professional educators. Given that the chat room only allowed for textual dialogue, individual learners were provided with an opportunity of choice when proclaiming certain facets of their selfhood (age, gender, ethnicity, sexual and political orientations). This *plasticity* of identity selection and choice allowed for deeper explorations of whom and how people made choices to represent themselves as being defined by certain demographic categories. Comments include:

‘Well alright. What are we supposed to be talking about in here? I am an indigenous person my self and I find this unit real confronting’

‘The thing I find difficult with some of the activities is when it relates to my personal history - I don’t much of it and I don’t have much family who can provide me with much info and I am getting on in years so my memory is starting to fail me’

‘as an Aboriginal student i found the first few weeks of the subject to be a relief in some ways. hard to define what i mean there ... but like it wasn’t just about me ... still thinking about that one, and why too ...’

‘Kieran - was it ever there? hehe - Jean, I’m think it must be a tiring thing! In some ways (coz I’m a white anglo) my resistance can be seen as a bit of luxury - whereas yours - a necessity. know what I mean?’

These comments are symptomatic of the opportunities that a chat room can provide for learners who wish to announce a facet of their identity as a way of grounding or framing contributions. By drawing students’ attention toward the possibilities of making identity choices from either a non-Indigenous or an Indigenous perspective provided one technique for students to explore the Indigenous/non-Indigenous cultural interface.

Risks: The goal of not allowing ‘closure’ required that the chat room instructor and students take risks not normally associated with ‘teacher as expert’ approaches to learning. These risks include authorising stories of dissonance, articulating self-critique and doubt, and allowing for more emotive techniques of anger, pride and derision as having a place within these exchanges. Examples include:

‘the thing for me is that the popular press have such an effect on me (and society) that it surprises me when I discover (yet again) how my views and opinions have been informed. Just knowing that a group has been mis represented doesn’t automatically turn one into an informed and well acting person (unfortunately)’

‘How about dates of Indigenous resistance to invasion? My schooling sadly neglected this aspect completely - with the result that for many years I thought that Indigenous peoples had just passively accepted the ‘inevitable’ colonisation of their country’

Receptivity: Modes of receptivity act to both *authorise* and *colonize* Indigenous knowledge and expression. Expressions of receptivity can act to authorise Indigenous perspectives — but can often reveal how non-Indigenous cultural constructions maintains control over the space of enquiry. Examples of this include:

‘See, alot of people’s views are that they didn’t do anything, like they weren’t the ones who done anything to the aboriginals BUT my argument is, why do they celebrate anzac day than? They didn’t fight in the war themselves personally so why remember it?’

‘I have had trouble getting this to get to screen - was unacceptable before - but why do Indigenous Australian have More right than I to be called Australian if I was born here?’

‘europeans have raped and pillaged this land we arent any model at all the only true australian yes is the ATSI people who actually give a dam’

Resistances can be said to occur at a number of different levels, such as ‘I can’t understand’, in which students resist by suggesting that they do not have the required amount of *information* to be able to comprehend the discussion point (for example, Indigenous history, Indigenous people); ‘I don’t know how to understand’, in which students resist by stating they don’t have the *skills* to be able to understand (for example, critical thinking and analysis skills); and ‘I won’t understand’; emotional, intellectual, psychological and behavioural forms of resistance when exposed to Indigenous as ‘authority’ in their classrooms (in which students actively resist the legitimacy of an Indigenous perspective).

Resistance happens through many levels: denial, appropriation and/or de-authorisation of Indigenous knowledge, maintaining control over the space of enquiry, non-engagement, authorising own ‘knowledge’ without questioning the fields through which they’ve developed that knowledge and resisting knowledge of others the same way. These forms of resistance are supported by the Western layers of knowledge production, socially and institutionally — which is why they can be presented one-dimensionally, for example, as a mere statement of fact, because it’s something that ‘we all’ know, no question. Examples of this include:

I have no rights or not as many as the indigenous peoples

there were people here before Aboriginals

but I feel as though I am apart of a society that does not want me here and then where do I go? Germany? Ireland? England?

I don’t feel racist what I do feel is very ignorant

I was hoping that this subject would help me in the classroom. Help me relate to ATSI kids in a way that would benefit them.

Conclusion

Further investigation into the use of ICTs in assisting students to explore different epistemic worlds is likely to be ongoing. The bulk of scholarship in the area of Indigenous Education seems to have focused on themes of ‘cultural inclusivity’ (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000), providing access pathways to Indigenous peoples (Hansen, 1987) as well as constructing an Indigenous market for technology vendors (Noacco, 1995).

This paper seeks to build on this area of scholarship by suggesting that moves away from deficit models of Indigenous Education must be accompanied by meaningful research into the way that non-Indigenous people construct their identity — and how ICTs can play a part in fostering a broader understanding and willingness to engage within dialogue across cultural divides and through cultural interfaces.

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