

Connection and connectedness: Realizing the imperative for Indigenous Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper expands upon a keynote presentation delivered at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Comparative and International Education Society in November 2014. The conference theme was International, Indigenous and Multicultural Imperatives for Education.

What is this imperative for Indigenous Education and how does it play out within learning environments? Education for, by and with Indigenous peoples has for many years been a contested space defined by more questions than answers. Consequently, the challenge lies in understanding the motivation for the imperative, its classification and the responsibilities contained therein. The practice of connection and connectedness can support the conditions in which learners, educators, policy makers, researchers and communities may meet this challenge.

Keywords: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, Education Imperatives, Indigenous Knowledges*

INTRODUCTION

Allow me to preface my remarks by framing my position. I am an Aboriginal and South Sea Islander man, living and working within an urban environment. I do not profess to speak on behalf of all Indigenous peoples or all Indigenous educators. I do not speak on behalf of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I am going to share with you some thoughts borne of my own experience as an Indigenous Australian, having been a student, a teacher, a university executive and academic.

My current work involves supporting the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges within the curriculum here at QUT. I have a three-year agenda called the In2Knowledges project with four broad aims –

- To increase the opportunities for all students to experience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in the curriculum;
- To increase the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the university as decision makers and deliverers,
- To increase understanding and capacity of QUT staff to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges; and
- To ensure our curriculum infrastructure including policy and process supports the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges.

This paper is presented in three parts: Firstly, *what is this imperative for Indigenous Education* and how does it play out within learning environments?

Education for, by and with Indigenous peoples continues to be a contested space often producing more questions than answers. This paper may prompt even more questions. I am conscious that presenting to the already converted may seem like redundancy but it is always good to consider motivations and affirmations for continuing commitment.

Secondly, I would like to deal with connections and the practice of connectedness as a mechanism supporting the conditions in which learners, educators, policy makers, researchers and communities may meet this challenge of the imperative. This paper presents current work occurring at the Queensland University of Technology as examples and finally, a different spin on the imperative and its potential for education.

THE IMPERATIVE for INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

When first asked to speak at this conference I was immediately drawn to the idea of this imperative - What is it? Who decreed it? Who is enacting it? And why does it exist?

What is this thing – the Imperative for Indigenous Education? Taken as an order or direction – an imperative has excitement attached to it. The imperative is authoritative *Do This Immediately* or someone could get hurt. Don't put your hand into fire / Come away from the bars of the Lion's cage. Immediate satisfaction of the imperative relies on the receiver understanding the danger. An imperative used in the context of education for Indigenous peoples is then fraught with challenges. What is the immediate danger and can everyone involved see it?

The imperative for Indigenous Education is tied to the participation and success by Indigenous peoples in education systems. As a vehicle of socialization education is a means to improving one's life socio-economic life chances. Statistics made available through national testing regimes indicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not performing at similar rates as their non-Indigenous peers across all of the domains tested. The Australian government's recent report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Key Indicators 2014 provides some sobering material

Between 2008 and 2013, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 3 students achieving national minimum standards for reading increased slightly, but there was no change for numeracy. There was no change for reading or numeracy for those in Years 5 and 7, no change for reading in Year 9 and a decrease for numeracy in Year 9.

The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20–24 year olds completing year 12 or equivalent or above increased from 45 per cent in 2008 to 59 per cent in 2012-13. For non-Indigenous Australians, the proportion remained between 86 and 88 per cent. (COAG, 2008)

As adults:

In 2012-13, 43 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20–64 year olds had a Certificate level III or above or were studying, a 17 percentage point increase from 2002. The gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians remained steady around 24–25 percentage points over the period.

In 2013, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians made up a much lower proportion of teachers than students (around 1 per cent of teachers and 5 per cent of students for both primary and secondary schools) (SCRGSP, 2014).

In the Australian higher education sector:

In 2013 there were approximately 13,700 students were reported as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people studying at Australian universities. 10,300 of these were undergraduates with 6,200 students commencing higher education that year (Department of Education, 2014). If the danger requiring the imperative is failing to close the educational attainment gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people – our education process becomes training and inducting Indigenous people into a system so they might ‘mind this gap’. This has been our direction for many years in Australia.

As educational researchers, we know the pursuit of the fuller participation and success for those groups who have been traditionally marginalized by western (for the most part) education is not new. The socio-political, economic and organizational infrastructure that is Education in Australia exercises power to include or exclude. Activism by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people against exclusion and towards greater inclusion has mobilized communities, public and private institutions, delivered change both small and large and been responsible for many careers (mine included - I would go as far to say and many others in this room.) This activism has resulted over time in specific policy agendas:

- National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP)¹
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (2010 – 2014)²
- Closing the Gap – Literacy, Numeracy and Individual Learning Plans³
- National Curriculum – Cross Curriculum Perspective⁴
- Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership – AITSL professional standards⁵
- QLD – Solid partners, Solid Futures Plan⁶

The imperative then is to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ educational participation and performance with a view to producing greater economic status and consequently access to benefits of living in a wealthy first world nation.

A simple strategy on paper – there is a clear outcome sought; the action has a positive trajectory as its focus and overall it is altruistic in its intent. However – Culture eats strategy for breakfast – Peter Drucker⁷. Drucker’s statement refers to internal organizational culture - a comment if you will on the best-laid plans or when the socio-cultural overcomes the economic. It can be expanded to characterize the external narrative due to such behaviour –praise and loyalty conversely negative criticism and loss. To take the culture of schooling, schools and systems as

¹http://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national_report_on_schooling_2009/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_education/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_education1.html (accessed 23/11/14)

²<https://education.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-action-plan-2010-2014-0> (accessed 23/11/14)

³<http://www.coag.gov.au/node/65> (accessed 23/11/14)

⁴http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/cross_curriculum_priorities.html (accessed 23/11/14)

⁵<http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list> (accessed 23/11/14)

⁶<https://indigenouportal.eq.edu.au/about/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 23/11/14)

⁷<http://thoughtmanagement.org/tag/peter-drucker/> (accessed 23/11/14)

the focus requires a longer view than the immediate identification of the dangerous achievement gap. It has been a significant part of educational research and has resulted in positive change. The greatest challenge however, is for us as educators to remember our work occurs within and is shaped consciously and subconsciously by our own culture and the culture in which we perform this work.

A SHORT INTERLUDE

I come from a family of teachers. My brother and sister-in-law teach primary school in a private International school delivering British curriculum located in the United Arab Emirates. My sister is a Head of Department and teaches business studies and accounting in a very large regional state secondary school in North Queensland. My own school teaching experience was two large secondary schools in Far North Queensland where I taught music and English. Our extended family includes another 12 or so teachers – Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary, University Academics and VET teachers, there's a school principal and a couple of educational bureaucrats. One of the questions that is always asked when we see each other is How's School? The answers invariably provide a narrative on the culture of the school or institution – the behaviours particular to an individual site in relation broader educational, political and social agendas. We are highly conscious of the cultures at play in which we operate. As teachers, culture is at work on and in the work we do. To effect change within these cultural sites, we will need to change behaviours.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION –CONNECTIONS, CONNECTEDNESS AND CULTURE

I am using terms of connection and connectedness within Indigenous Education and as principles for action more broadly. Connection may be described as those related and relatable states in which individuals, families, cohorts, professionals, communities, systems and societies come together. To make a connection takes effort and relies on defining responsibilities and enactment of reciprocity. They happen over time and rely on trust.

Connectedness is the current in which these relationships flow and then becomes both a practice and value of culture. As an example of a work in progress – I would like to speak about my current work here at QUT. The In2knowledges project at QUT seeks to affect a change in culture for the specific purpose of increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in our curriculum at QUT.

This agenda is not new to QUT and has arisen from academic and professional staff reflecting on previous achievements and aspiring for greater inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the curriculum. Whilst this has been informed by recent government and sector developments QUT is seeking to articulate its unique position in this curriculum space.

THE OODGEROO UNIT – MINOR IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES⁸

The Oodgeroo Unit is responsible for student services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It is also a teaching and research unit of the university. This year the academics Dr Deb Duthie, Dr Julie McLaughlin and Dr Odette Best developed and submitted for approval one of the only university-wide minors here at QUT. This was approved through our curriculum committees and processes through to the University Academic Board. The OU minor in Indigenous Knowledges is aimed at building greater depth and experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and may be taken by any undergraduate student at the university.

⁸ <https://www.qut.edu.au/about/oodgeroo/indigenous-knowledges-minor>

Defining Indigenous Knowledges is challenging. It is not an individual and discrete body of knowledge rather it is reflected in the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, traditions and narratives. For QUT, the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges is contextualized by the university's learning, teaching and research. The opportunities for inclusion in the curriculum must be relevant and have impact for the benefit of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as well as our students and staff. As an institution we have not come to this position in isolation. The broader national and international agenda for Indigenous peoples' rights particularly education rights is informing the work.

The International Context

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)⁹ articulates specific education rights related to access and participation, cultural preservation and knowledge protection through Articles 5, 13, 14, 31 and 36. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)¹⁰ has a mandate to provide advice to the UN Economic and Social Council regarding the implementation and practice of the rights of Indigenous peoples. The inclusion and protection of Indigenous Knowledges within education, community development, biodiversity and socio-political action are pursued through recommendations made to nation states, UN agencies and other international bodies.

The Convention of Biodiversity through Article 8j¹¹ states that parties shall subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge innovations and practices.

The International Labour Organization C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) Article 31¹².

Educational measures shall be taken among all sections of the national community, and particularly among those that are in most direct contact with the peoples concerned, with the object of eliminating prejudices that they may harbour in respect of these peoples. To this end, efforts shall be made to ensure that history textbooks and other educational materials provide a fair, accurate and informative portrayal of the societies and cultures of these peoples. The World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC)¹³ gives pragmatic and collaborative effect to the rights contained within the UNDRIP. The WINHEC has implemented a quality assurance and accreditation process for institutions and programs with responsibilities for Indigenous peoples' education. The consortium has operated for over 12 years having been established during the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education held in Kananaskis, Canada. Indigenous peoples from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, mainland United States, Native Hawaiian, Samiland and Taiwan regularly contribute to its

⁹ The full text of the UNDRIP is available at: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf (accessed 2/10/13)

¹⁰ The UNPFII is an advisory body to the UN's Economic and Social Council. More information is available at: <http://undesadspd.org/IndigenousPeoples.aspx> (accessed 18/11/13)

¹¹ <http://www.cbd.int/convention/articles/default.shtml?a=cbd-08> (accessed 2/10/13)

¹² http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 (accessed 18/11/13)

¹³ The WINHEC is made up of international Indigenous academics and leaders in Indigenous higher education. It established the World Indigenous Nations University and seeks to promote Indigenous Knowledges across the world.

operations. The WINHEC aims to share information and practices to ensure the best education is delivered to Indigenous peoples across the world. The consortium is also concerned with sharing Indigenous Knowledges with the broader human family so that the Earth may be protected.

I refer to these international instruments because we recognize we are not alone in this space. It is vital to respect, appreciate and share information available through the work undertaken across the Pacific and further afield. The Indigenous Education movement is global.

The QUT Indigenous Knowledges Position

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and histories have been part of Australian university curricula for a considerable time. It is only relatively recently however through Indigenous and Non-Indigenous academics advocating for inclusion and developments within disciplines, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives have moved from the studies (about) through to engagement approaches (about and with) to impact and changing Knowledges (embedded, by and from). This progression in both content development and delivery requires institutions to articulate their position in the current Indigenous Knowledges movement to effect mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, institutions and communities; the engagement of existing and new university staff; recruitment of students attracted to the socio-political stance of an Australian university and the production of graduates who are skilled, knowledgeable and proud to have received an inclusive education.

Bringing Indigenous Knowledges into the western academic canon requires context. This context is provided through connections and connectedness. QUT articulates and encourages inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges across all of its faculties and courses. The university does not choose to limit its course offerings to any one category of Indigenous Knowledges inclusion. It will continue to support units and courses which are studies (about) and engagement (about and with) and promote greater development of opportunities for impact (embedded, by and from). The university does not view the range and types of inclusion as a linear progression but rather as diversity within its curriculum where the sum of the component parts is greater than the whole.

The QUT Indigenous Knowledges position moves toward a definition for the use by students, staff and the broader communities the university serves.

Indigenous Knowledges are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences and world views; traditional and contemporary, affirmed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and cultures.

Indigenous Knowledges are found within Indigenous peoples, their communities, their languages, their lands, waters and their bodies.

QUT acknowledges the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their Knowledges and that these are ancient, contemporary and evolving.

Indigenous Knowledges includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expressions of the intersection of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous societies.

Indigenous Knowledges within the curriculum occurs through the inclusion and promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. (Thomas 2103)

THE QUT APPROACH

QUT recognizes that Australian society; its public and private sector institutions are grappling with the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. The university is committed to producing graduates who can contribute as knowledgeable, focused and skilled professionals and understands that solutions are to be found through relationships – connections and connectedness based on respect, responsibility and partnership. Various Australian professional associations have determined their members will be better able to exercise their professional duties to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities. They have introduced curriculum and learning experience requirements as part of course accreditation processes. The university will ensure students within its professional degrees will receive the training necessary to satisfy the requirements of the professional associations and accrediting authorities.

The intention to produce graduates better equipped to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and issues of importance is one part of the rationale for Indigenous Knowledges in the curriculum. The other and more significant part is producing graduates who are self-reflective human beings willing and able to take responsibility for their place and position in a global human family. Indigenous Knowledges in the curriculum is dependent on connectedness. The university will offer students the opportunity to extend their understanding and experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges through renewal of existing curriculum, concurrent or extension offerings and extra curricula opportunities.

In this way we are attempting to change the culture of the organization by influencing the education it delivers. Part of our rationale is providing an education to all of our students that is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges may go towards decreasing the gap or danger for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attainment in the higher education space. This then requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to shape us, shape our institutional culture and shape the education we will deliver.

How are we doing this?

Connection and Connectedness requires the establishment of relationships built upon trust. It is a very human activity we are involved. Communication about the purpose through conversations has been a major characteristic of my work. Speaking to individuals at all levels of the communities and the institution: How to establish relationships between academics and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; relationships between academics themselves; and the staff and students.

The greatest inhibitor of the development of connections and connectedness is fear. Fear of the political, economic, theoretical and social can waylay the best intentions. Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast. To move people into the connectedness space relies on open, consistent and constant engagement. Articulation of the benefit more broadly to communities, academics and students supports this level of engagement. This brings me to the final element of my presentation – with a re-positioning of the words. Not the Imperative for Indigenous Education but the Indigenous Imperative for Education.

THE INDIGENOUS IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATION

What would the Indigenous Imperative for Education look like? Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through their cultures; knowledges and practices demonstrate and meet the human need for connection. Knowing and understanding that people are connected to each other,

to land, water, animals, plants, the air and sky underpins behaviour. There are rules that govern the interaction of these elements to produce the good life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and can give effect to the good life for other peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continuing survival despite the devastation enacted upon them through government policy, social attitudes and exploitation is determined through connection. Connectedness is the underlying principle of reciprocity. Without the knowledge, recognition and practice of connectedness it is not possible to perform the responsibilities as determined by the relationship. (Thomas, 2015, p.215)

The Indigenous Imperative for Education would be for all people to understand and respect their relationships to each other and the planet. That they would be able to walk gently on country and recognize they're part of the human family. That education for everyone is respectful of the rights and responsibilities of these relationships. This education is vital if we as human beings are to deal with the major challenges facing the world.

Poverty and Food Security

Access to Clean Water

Leveraging the increases in Technology and the proposed Economic Growth for the betterment of all peoples

Improving the Status of Women

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR EDUCATION?

We talk a lot about what is the future of higher education here at QUT. How will we teach? What will students want and how will they want it? We consider how just enough and just in time and the role of the student as curator of their educational journey will act as driver for how we deliver. Underpinning these discussions however is the understanding education is a human activity designed and supported by human beings.

What can you do?

As members of the ANZ Comparative and International Education Society, you are in a unique position. Your research can shift thinking; encourage the maverick ideas, evaluate and support risk taking and of most import it has the potential to change the culture of our educational institutions and the bureaucracies they exist within. You can promote cultural change where behaviour changes and the Indigenous Imperative for Education may be realized. Most of all, you can research and support research that fosters connections and connectedness. You can carry on conversations throughout this conference and at your home institutions.

The Indigenous peoples' imperative for Education is for everyone – it is hope. It is for the pursuit of a good life in which all are fed, all are quenched, all songs are sung and the Earth our mother is respected.

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