

DESIGNING AND EVALUATING PLACE-BASED CULTURAL IMMERSIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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SUBTHEME: Elevating First Nations Australians' Sciences

Transforming science curricula in higher education is crucial for cultivating graduates who value inclusivity and diversity, possess adaptable and innovative thinking skills, and approach the world's multifaceted challenges from multiple viewpoints. To realise this objective, students must have access to meaningful opportunities for direct engagement with Indigenous communities, philosophies, methodologies and knowledge systems. Immersive place-based experiences enable this deep connection; profound learning happens when the consequences of ongoing colonisation on peoples and Country are made locally relevant and personally meaningful (Cornthassel & Hardbarger, 2019).

To facilitate this learning, we collaboratively designed and implemented a unit of study centered on Indigenous Land and Food Knowledges (AGEN3008/GEOS3055) as a platform for fostering relationships and advancing cultural understanding and capability among staff and students. This unit was co-created in 2014/2015 alongside Indigenous educational specialists, community leaders and members, operating across NT and WA for four years before being refreshed in 2023 for an enhanced NSW version. For the NSW iteration, the USyd team formed a strong partnership with the Wiradyuri Traditional Owners Central West Aboriginal Corporation (WTOCWAC), who provide their distinctive online cultural orientation program rooted in their traditional pedagogical approaches of Yindyamaldhuray Yalbilinya Mawang [respectful learning together]; this serves as preparation for their in-person, on-Country Cultural experience with WTOCWAC and establishes the foundation for the rest of the immersive experience.

This paper shares results from an evaluative project (ACDS funded) regarding the design and execution of effective Cultural Immersions; we explore key design and Cultural elements including Custodianship, relationships, time, being present and holding space, flexibility, dialogue and debrief, rest, reflection, reciprocity, critical thinking and enduring connections. We also identified the short and long-term impacts on participant cultural understanding and capability development. The themes that have emerged include embracing discomfort, recognising ignorance, deep listening, building relationships, understanding Country, reconnecting with nature, reconnecting with culture, questioning education, comprehending ongoing injustice, and personal repositioning and reorientation. We show how thoughtfully constructed Cultural Immersions - enacted under the Cultural guidance of Traditional Knowledge Holders and their ancient protocols and governance - act as powerful drivers for authentic transformative education and enable bottom-up Cultural transformation in higher education settings.

REFERENCES

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