

# Aboriginal Voices: Up Front and Centre

JARED THOMAS

David Unaipon School of Indigenous Education and Research  
University of South Australia

In July 2007, as part of the 'The Colonial Present' ASAL conference, Sam Wagan Watson, Dr Ernie Blackmore and I were given the opportunity to discuss aspects of our teaching and writing practices during the Black Words Plenary Session chaired by Dr Anita Heiss.

Watson is an award-winning poet of Bunjalung, Birri Gubba, German Scottish and Irish descent. Blackmore is a playwright and lecturer at the University of Wollongong's Woolyungah Indigenous Centre. I am a Nukunu person of the Southern Flinders Ranges in South Australia, a fiction writer and lecturer at the University of South Australia's David Unaipon School of Indigenous Education and Research (DUCIER).

Our brief for the plenary session was to discuss responses to our own creative works and those of other Aboriginal writers together with our experiences of teaching Indigenous literature. This paper, however, focuses upon my personal reflection on experiences of teaching Indigenous literature and the methods and principles that assist this teaching. My insights are underpinned by thoughts and reflections shared by Watson and Blackmore.

This paper discusses three major themes: addressing stereotypes, sometimes racist, of Aboriginal people, establishing appropriate roles for both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous teachers of Aboriginal subject and being sensitive to the position of students, particularly Indigenous students who might too easily be assumed to possess authority with regard to the content of Aboriginal-focused subjects.

The Black Words Plenary Session provided a timely opportunity for me to reflect on both my teaching of Aboriginal literature and my fiction writing experiences. In the fortnight leading up to the conference I had just finished teaching the course *Aboriginal Voices*, a third year course at the University of South Australia originally devised by Penny Taylor and then taught by Dr Alice Healy.

I have found the delivery of Indigenous knowledge and perspective through both creative writing and teaching an emotionally demanding and politically complex process. On the one hand, the postcolonial experiences of Aboriginal people are both frequently distressing and contested by the mainstream, and on the other I am bound by Nukunu protocol which means that a great deal of consultation and compromise is involved when speaking about Nukunu experience. Whenever my writing is performed or I speak to an audience about Aboriginal issues or experiences I often feel uncomfortable. Uncomfortable that members of my audience may possess racist views and that I will be challenged.

When discussing the formation of mainstream views regarding Aboriginal Australia, Dennis Foley (163) cites Steve Mickler's assertion that 'shock jocks' contribute largely to mainstream viewpoints and that:

Some of their critics argue they serve to keep alive two pernicious myths: the superiority of 'white' Anglo-Celtic civilisation and the myth that Indigenous Australians are a privileged group who receive welfare and other government assistance above and beyond that made available to non-Indigenous people. (Foley quoting Mickler, Foley 163)

I am very conscious of these two myths and often find myself contesting them in a teaching context. Irene Watson encapsulates the position of the Aboriginal voice in these circumstances:

Speaking or telling the black 'truth' of Australia's colonial history means challenging white supremacist 'truths' of history. When Aboriginal people speak in opposition to white truths, we are accused of having a blinkered or 'black armband' view of history. (16)

While team teaching Aboriginal Voices with Healy I found that she experienced similar anxieties, albeit a little different in nature. We both sought to gain from the team teaching experience; Healy shared with me a very well-constructed course framework and experience of teaching the course, while I provided her with an Aboriginal perspective through which to consider Aboriginal writing practice and critique.

The David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (DUCIER) where Healy and I both work is an Aboriginal space. Headed by Professor Peter Buckskin, previously the most senior Aboriginal public servant in South Australia, the college is staffed predominantly by Aboriginal academics. DUCIER delivers Aboriginal and Australian undergraduate degree and masters courses, whilst the University's Indigenous Content in Undergraduate Programs Plan (ICUP) ensures that academics from many backgrounds including health, law and education teach Aboriginal material

to students of other divisions of the University. Our charter is increasing. As a result of the ICUP agreement DUCIER provides leadership and direction to Schools across the University in planning and implementing proposals to include Aboriginal courses, and ensures the development of an online exemplar covering what might be considered core knowledge of Indigenous issues relevant to all undergraduates.

From the outset, Healy, as a Non-Indigenous academic, voiced concern and reservation about teaching the course *Aboriginal Voices*, though she has particular skills in the teaching of subjects in the Australia Studies degree. I sympathised with her position and agreed that within an Aboriginal learning environment such as DUCIER, assigning Non-Indigenous lecturers Aboriginal specific courses did seem questionable. Many commentators share Jo Lampert's view that 'Non-Indigenous Australians can be experts on many things without a doubt, but not on Indigenous Australia' (95); this contributes to the anxiety of Non-Indigenous educators when delivering Aboriginal content. The fact is that at the time Healy was given the coordination responsibilities she was indeed the best candidate for the position, given her expertise in the study of literature, and the teaching and research commitments of Aboriginal colleagues.

Discussion with Healy regarding the teaching of Indigenous literature by Non-Indigenous people has contributed to my teaching methods and is also the impetus for this paper. This is because I mostly teach Non-Indigenous students and hope that they will employ diligently the knowledge that I share with them. In preparation for the Black Words Plenary Session I spoke with Heiss about the role of Non-Indigenous people teaching Aboriginal-focussed subjects. She concurred that it is always preferable to have Aboriginal people teaching Aboriginal subjects but this isn't always practicable, so it is our responsibility as Aboriginal academics to encourage effective and ethical teaching practices when teaching Aboriginal literature. My analysis of Healy's teaching methods fortunately have provided a favourable framework for this discussion. In developing and teaching the *Aboriginal Voices* course Healy has presented a sound model and a positioning of the teacher that is extremely useful for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous teachers alike. The model situates the author, text and Aboriginal thinkers 'up front and centre'; hence the title of the course, *Aboriginal Voices*. The way in which Healy devised the course in line with the principles of ICUP means that the central role of the teacher in this framework is to facilitate exploration through discussion of Indigenous texts, theory and debate.

The teaching and undertaking of an Aboriginal course can be confronting for both the Non-Indigenous teacher and student as it entails a venturing into a

space that cannot be experienced directly by the teacher or the student. The best one can hope for is that both the teacher and student gain an understanding, respect and appreciation for Aboriginal people and culture. This is also the exact reason I write fiction with an Aboriginal focus.

When considering the position of the Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal person teaching Indigenous literature it is important to recognise that while the Aboriginal teacher may at times be able to explain their experiences as an Indigenous person, Indigenous experience differs from one individual to the next. With this in mind both the Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal teacher must possess a sound knowledge of Indigenous history, experiences, critique and theory to guide the students on their own journeys toward understanding.

Foley states that 'the greatest fear held by Indigenous Australian educators is that Aboriginal or Indigenous Australian studies will continue to be taught begrudgingly and spasmodically' (113). He then goes on to provide some very practical ways in which one can increase their understanding of Indigenous culture and history and points out to educators that, 'should Indigenous history and cultural interaction not appear in your teaching, it will be incomplete and imbalanced. It will also be flawed and discriminatory.' (113)

One of the expectations that my DUCIER colleagues and I have when teaching in partnership, is that our Non-Indigenous counterparts speak out when racism against Indigenous people occurs. This can be a very powerful act because it assists students to take responsibility for the recognition of racism, and the Aboriginal academic knows they are supported.

Blackmore said of Aboriginal writing during the Black Words Plenary Session:

In the recent past Australia has witnessed the development of Indigenous writers that are wearing the mantle of pioneers, charged with carrying a particular message forward. This message is in direct contrast with the contradictory history favoured by the current Prime Minister John Howard, who according to Michelle Grattan came to office mounting an assault on political correctness and critical of the black arm view of relationships with Aboriginal people. What we have been witnessing here in a number of sessions at this ASAL conference is analysis of some counter type stories, not all of them from the pen of Aboriginal writers but many reflecting the struggle against a whole raft of disadvantage brought to bear by successive government policies purported to be the unstated or unacknowledged submissiveness of successive generations of Australians who have been duped by defective versions of history. And it is history or a defective history in the main that drives many of Australia's Indigenous authors, playwrights and screenwriters.

This statement encapsulates the tensions encountered by the communicator of Aboriginal knowledge, the author writing of Aboriginal experience, and the teacher and learner of Indigenous subject. Firstly we have many versions of Australian history which contest or completely ignore the Indigenous versions of history. Those in power provide the popular version of history; in this case Blackmore refers to Howard's power to erode opportunities to hear Aboriginal voices. This leads me to the mindset of students one may encounter when teaching Aboriginal-focused courses. Some students are keen participants in the study of Aboriginal knowledge while others are very reluctant. This reluctance in the case of the students that I teach can come from the compulsory undertaking of Aboriginal knowledge as part of their undergraduate degree through (ICUP), coupled with their acceptance of popular but inaccurate notions of Australian history, Aboriginal people and experience. I am appreciative of ICUP because it provides the opportunity to impact positively upon students that may have otherwise never contemplated studying Aboriginal subjects.

As both a writer and lecturer I have come to expect that readers and students assume little or no knowledge of Indigenous literature and knowledge of Aboriginal experience, history or culture. This understanding is strangely motivating because I've come to learn that the endowment of knowledge to the most ignorant or racist student is the sweetest success.

Foley discusses the importance of thinking beyond your own cultural framework when saying:

It is acknowledged that you (the reader and potential educator) have been moulded, as we all have been, by your own cultural background. This may be very different from those of your students. It is important that you accept the right of the individual to respect the culture of their upbringing and moderate your own cultural assumptions. Even if you are an Indigenous person you will still need to modify your actions/ decision making process to make them comprehensible and acceptable to communities that are different to your own. (Foley 165)

The long tenure of the Howard government has meant that many students have become apathetic to politics in general. As a teacher I suggest that when teaching an Aboriginal subject one must first unpack and address the views of students regarding Aboriginal people and experience. In doing this I expect to be challenged by students who may reveal racist or ignorant attitudes. My Uncle Kym Thomas, a cultural awareness instructor at the University of South Australia shared with me a simple but delicate exercise that I now employ to unpack racist and stereotypical views and address them, somewhat by stealth.

The first part of the exercise is to have students write down three things that come to mind about Aboriginal people. I later read these comments to the class. Sometimes the thoughts of students can reveal what I term 'positive' stereotypes such as: all Aboriginal people are good at sport. The second part of the exercise is to have students write down the three worst things that they think could happen to an individual. Responses include being separated from family or having a parent or child die, or losing the family home.

The first part of the exercise can be very difficult and one needs to retain composure when reading student responses. This is easier to do when conscious that the second part of the exercise will help to address misconceptions about Aboriginal people and experience. The three worse things considered by students inevitably have happened and sometimes continue to happen to Aboriginal people through colonial experience.

My decision to prompt racist and stereotypical views of Aboriginal Australia into the classroom was encouraged by several things including a conversation with University of South Australia graduate Vincent Branson. Branson explained a situation where a fellow Aboriginal class member became aggressive in response to comments made by his Non-Indigenous class members in a tutorial. Branson told me he pointed out to the man that the Non-Indigenous students' attitudes were likely developed through what their parents had told them, in a loving caring manner, despite the information being incorrect. Branson's advice was that to address racist and ignorant beliefs one needs to speak calmly and compassionately to the students in order to counter misconceptions.

This is extremely sound advice because it acknowledges that knowledge of Aboriginal Australia is usually transmitted by Non-Indigenous people to other non-Indigenous people, and interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is rare or limited. Therefore when an Aboriginal person has the opportunity to share with others knowledge about their culture and experiences it is an important moment, serious business, one that Watson (2007) referred to as: 'stealing air' during the plenary session. When educating students about Aboriginal Australia it is important to assist students to open their hearts before they can open their minds.

Also informing my decision to prompt racist and stereotypical views of Aboriginal Australia is my belief that it is best to know what misconceptions students possess of Aboriginal Australia in order to select appropriate literature and group exercises that can serve to counter these preconceptions. A great deal of care needs to be taken with this exercise. As an Aboriginal person I

remind the students that deliberately racist or challenging comments can be very hurtful. Before implementing the exercise I also speak with Aboriginal students privately about what I hope to achieve through the use of this exercise.

Following on from Blackmore's comment regarding disadvantage brought to bear by successive government policies, it is crucial to provide an understanding of affirmative action in preparation for any Aboriginal study. Non-Indigenous students often find affirmative action, or government policy deemed to favour Indigenous people, inequitable. It is this perceived inequity that fuels racism and stereotypes.

Both Watson's and Blackmore's addresses during the Black Words Plenary Session articulated the need for the inclusion of multiple Indigenous voices in the facilitation of learning about Aboriginal literature.

Watson drew a distinction between his creative activities and academic life stating that the difference in approach to literature can sometimes create misunderstandings and barriers. Watson pointed to the historical division between Aboriginal people and academics, and the consequent mistrust of academia by Aboriginal people, referring to the case of the anthropologist Norman Tindale. Watson said that though Tindale recorded the languages of Aboriginal people, his work was complicit in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Watson also expressed his concerns about academia by discussing incidents when academics, including Aboriginal academics, have 'overanalysed' his work. Watson says that this is a frequent occurrence and raised the question, 'What is the point of writing a book about hidden messages when all I want to do is entertain you?' Despite Watson's reference to what he deems to be the negative aspects of academia he stated, 'The best way to learn about Aboriginal writing is to have an Aboriginal writer in the Class. We have to steal the air that is reserved for other voices'.

There are many advantages to involving an Aboriginal writer in the tutorial or workshop and many ways to do so. Providing the opportunity for writers to speak to students about their work assists Aboriginal social justice, an important element in the teaching of Aboriginal issues. It may also increase opportunities for the writer and the institution. Engagement between an Aboriginal author and a learning institution can result in trust and understanding of the learning institution's roles and principles. As a result the writer may undertake further study at the institution or encourage other Aboriginal people including their children and grandchildren to pursue education opportunities. Introducing students to a range of authors shows

some of the diversity that exists in Aboriginal Australia, an important step in understanding Aboriginal Australia. As an author I have addressed students over the phone, by email and phone conferencing. Technology is enabling outsiders to enter the lecture no matter where they may be.

Healy has adopted the principle that Aboriginal people must have written the majority of references used in an Aboriginal literature course including the criticism set to enable student study. Today there are a great number of Aboriginal academics reviewing and critiquing Aboriginal literature and film including Anita Heiss's *Dhuuluu-Yala (To Talk Straight)*, a key text for any Aboriginal literature course. It is crucial to represent Aboriginal people as not only the writers of creative and autobiographical work of fiction but of academic writing. This is especially important for Aboriginal students as it lends impetus to work toward academic careers.

Children's literature and film hold a special place in the delivery of any Aboriginal knowledge. It can be fun and a safe space from which to start an exploration of Indigenous literature and concepts, particularly if your students have aspirations to teach. Children's books are often written in ways that make them easy to understand so students that are resistant to Aboriginal knowledge feel embarrassed if they don't engage with the work. It is also important to remember that some students will become parents. If they are shown the joy of Aboriginal children's books it is more likely that they will read Aboriginal work to their own students and children. When this starts to occur on a very large scale, there will be huge benefits for Aboriginal people and Australian society.

My desire when teaching Aboriginal literature is to facilitate a situation whereby the number of people reading Indigenous literature from birth to death increases so that they view learning about Indigenous culture as a life long process.

Having discussed what I consider to be some of the key issues that make teaching Indigenous knowledge a difficult task, including popular notions of Aboriginal Australia espoused by those in positions of power, the common transmission of knowledge of Aboriginal Australia from Non-Aboriginal person to Non-Aboriginal person, and how to reveal and address student attitudes to race in a productive way, let me turn to the relationship between teacher and Indigenous student.

The institution can be far removed from the life and experiences of many Indigenous students and it can be a challenging and threatening place for many of them. There are two key mistakes that can be made when working with

Indigenous students. The first is to assume that the student has heightened knowledge of Aboriginal issues and experience, and consequently place them in the spotlight by continually asking them for comment. The second mistake that can be made is to ignore the presence and knowledge base of Indigenous students undertaking an Indigenous specific subject. I know what it is like to be on either side of the fence and neither is pleasant. However, a happy medium can be struck.

Upon meeting your students it may not be apparent which student possesses heritage or has family or personal links to Aboriginal authors or people. One of the first things that I do when meeting a new class is to ask students to speak to me privately if they are of Aboriginal background or have family or personal links to Aboriginal authors. If a student makes contact the consequent discussion can pave the way for how to proceed in class. I have encountered Non-Aboriginal students that have personal relationships with Aboriginal authors and would like to discuss their insights with the class. I've also encountered Aboriginal students that wish to participate like any other member of the class as they may be undergoing a learning process too. Some Aboriginal students like to speak openly about their experiences and also provide advice on how certain issues can be addressed or give feedback on class progress. It is a delicate process but one needs to be mindful that it is the students that must benefit from the course rather than the teacher.

Foley says in regard to this predicament:

The sad reality is that either many educators never teach or interact with Indigenous Australians, or do so but remain unaware that students in their classrooms have had Indigenous upbringings (to varying degrees) and life experiences but do not publicly identify as Indigenous. (Foley 97)

Returning to the complexities of teaching Aboriginal knowledge, I have advice that relates to the individual who facilitates the learning of Aboriginal knowledge, culture and issues. The first advice that I offer is to reflect seriously on why you have put yourself in the position of teaching Aboriginal subjects. This is important as personal conviction will assist when being challenged and, as I stated earlier, it is important to deliver information in a caring and loving manner. Secondly, I urge you to be very clear about what you wish to impart to the students over the teaching period and what you want them to come away with. I mostly hope that students complete a course having developed empathy for Aboriginal and other disadvantaged peoples. If they possess empathy they are well on their way to a lifelong engagement with Aboriginal people and issues. I also urge you to try to maintain a healthy

distance from debate, letting the students arrive at their own understandings, intervening only to add important information that may be missing from the discussion or to prompt discussion.

Finally I stress that it is integral that Indigenous literature and knowledge be taught as part of any Australian literature and history course. There are few Indigenous people teaching Australian literature and history courses which means that Aboriginal thinkers and academics need to play a part in ensuring that Non-Indigenous teachers are well equipped to teach Indigenous knowledge at the primary, secondary and tertiary level, providing not only the next generations of Non-Aboriginal people with true Australian stories but also Aboriginal children with a true sense of their being.

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