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Leading the Way: Indigenous knowledge and Collaboration at the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre*

Colleen McGloin, Anne Marshall, and Michael Adams

Abstract

This paper derives from collaborative research undertaken by staff at the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre, into our own teaching practice. It articulates a particular strand of inquiry emanating from the research: the importance of Indigenous knowledges as this is taught at Woolyungah in the discipline of Indigenous Studies. The paper is a reflection of Woolyungah's pedagogical aims, and its development as a Unit that seeks to embed other knowledges into the realm of critical inquiry within subjects taught at the Unit. It also reflects student responses to our pedagogy. The writers are Indigenous and non-Indigenous and have collaborated with all teaching staff involved to present this work as a starting point for discussions about the emerging discipline of Indigenous Studies, its rigour as an academic field of inquiry and our commitment as educators to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in our programme.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous; knowledge; collaboration; Indigenous Studies

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"…power produces knowledge …there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (Foucault, 1977, p27.)

Introduction

The Woolyungah Indigenous Centre, University of Wollongong, has been undertaking an ongoing, collaborative research project within the context of contemporary theories of Indigenous pedagogies (e.g. Nakata 2003, Smith 1999). We have researched past and current teaching and learning processes and practices at the Centre and in Australian and overseas universities. In addition to looking at our student profiles, the project, entitled *Leading the Way: Indigenous Teaching and Learning at the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre*, Woolyungah has been benchmarking best practice student support strategies and administrative systems that will enable the Centre to be soundly and sustainably managed. *Leading the Way: Indigenous Teaching & Learning at Woolyungah* draws from the main themes articulated in the preamble to the 2008 World Indigenous Education Conference[i] in identifying a context for Indigenous Studies at this university: firstly, to share and learn and to promote best practices in Indigenous education policies, secondly, to honour and celebrate Indigenous cultures and traditions. Our aim is to enhance the Centre's future directions within the University and more broadly, on a national and global level.

The Woolyungah Indigenous Centre comprises seven full-time academic staff, five of whom are Indigenous, and two non-Indigenous. The bulk of the research for this project was carried out by Anne Marshall, an Indigenous academic from the Bega campus of UoW who worked extensively on the research with Woolyungah staff. The paper reflects some of the philosophical questions that came to light during our study and speaks to a particular thread in our inquiry: the role of Indigenous knowledges in Woolyungah's developing teaching and learning praxis and their practical application. We use the plural term 'knowledges' throughout to foreground the diversity of epistemologies that constitute Indigenous cultures locally, nationally and globally. While there are many similarities between Indigenous groups globally, there are of course numerous variations and differences as well (Smith 1999). At Woolyungah, while our primary emphasis is Australian Indigenous cultures, we also teach about Native American, Sami, Maori and other Indigenous cultures.

From an analysis of data collected from Indigenous education centres in our research, we are stimulated to think about some of the ethical and practical issues relating to Indigenous education, more specifically, to what we mean when we speak of Indigenous knowledge as an

episteme we are attempting to embed in the Indigenous Studies program at Woolyungah. The paper is the beginning of what we see as an on-going discussion and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff at Woolyungah and elsewhere in the field of Indigenous Studies. It reflects our commitment to re-thinking the nature of knowledge as this relates to Indigenous Studies and echoes Woolyungah's commitment to Indigenous education as specified in the following statement:

> The University embraces the strategic agenda set out by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (Commonwealth of Australia 2007) for increasing the visibility of Indigenous culture and knowledge; addressing the uneven quality of Indigenous research programs; improving the number of Indigenous people working in Australian universities; and raising the level of participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management. (http://www.uow.edu.au/wic/indigenouseducationstatement/index.htm)

In framing this discussion with Foucault's correlation between power and knowledge, we situate our research more broadly within his ideas about the *episteme*, and how knowledge is sanctioned in various ways by institutions. In the context of this paper, we are interested in reinstating knowledges that are often omitted from the realm of the western episteme. Foucault sees the episteme as a discursive apparatus and in *The Order of Things* relates the concept to scientific notions of 'truth' that historically regulate and validate much Western scientific knowledge. Foucault's work is useful when thinking about the privileging of certain kinds of knowledge in educational institutions and how truth and knowledge operate within discourse to reflect the vested interests of particular stakeholders. Foucault's analysis of scientific knowledge brings into view the recency of much Western scientific knowledge. It allows us to consider the effects of colonialism in ignoring the ancient, different and diverse scientific knowledge systems of Indigenous people and their tested applications in maintaining land and culture. The episteme, Foucault states, 'makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific.' (1980, 197) In denaturalising science as the most validated western discourse, Foucault sets up a framework whereby other knowledges can be introduced, authorised and applied within an episteme that considers science across a much broader historical and geographical trajectory which gives primacy to Indigenous ways of knowing.

Indigenous knowledges

Understandings of Indigenous knowledge vary considerably in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. 'Indigenous knowledges' are based in specific ontologies - ways of being, believing, understanding, experiencing, seeing and representing the lived and spiritual worlds - that are specific to particular groups of people. As Nakata points out, Indigenous knowledge differs across place and means differently to various groups of people but is understood "in terms of its distance from scientific knowledge" (2007, p.185). Indigenous knowledges comprise ways of knowing and understanding the world that in many cultures predates what we understand as science in its Western modality. Within the context of teaching and learning, Indigenous knowledges can be understood as information that comes from experience, from millennia of interaction with the physical, spiritual and material elements of life, from survival and from the understanding of the world that this imparts. In saying this, however, it is not our intention to set up a binary distinction between ways of knowing that are mutually exclusive; on the contrary, all human knowledge systems reflect similarities, as they simultaneously articulate difference. This is not an essentialist position. Rather, it is a question of the different ways in which knowledge systems are positioned within political structures and dominant societal institutions such as Western universities so that knowledge itself becomes hierarchical: in other words, some knowledges are preferred, respected, valued and aspired to, and others are not. We can see that in most Western institutions of teaching and learning that certain types of knowledge are taught, particular truths sanctioned and that there is a struggle for other forms of knowledge to gain recognition, let alone credibility. Foucault argues that 'truth' is produced through the relationship between power and different kinds of knowledge, suggesting that less 'valid' knowledges are subjugated and constitute "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated" (1980, 82). It is usually at times of crisis, for example, during an environmental trauma, that considerations of other, ancient and applied knowledges are called upon. It is important to note that the science applied by Indigenous people is based in much more diverse assumptions or beliefs about 'truth' and 'proof'. Indigenous scientific knowledge is grounded in observation of the world over millennia. Its authority, then, derives not from hypotheses, but from tens of thousands of years of 'listening' and experiencing; it is the basis of survival.

Native American scholar Vine Deloria Jr. also spoke of the relationship between power and knowledge as this applies to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ways of knowing for Native American peoples. Deloria challenges much contemporary scientific 'fact' about native American 'migration' by proffering other explanations (see *Red Earth, White Lies*, 1995). Martin Nakata's work also critiques the authority of Western knowledge systems (2003, 2007) through his theorisation of Indigenous Standpoint Theory as a coherent and culturally relevant way of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and accounting for Indigenous experience within Western teaching and learning institutions:

> For Indigenous students, academics and researchers, standpoint theory in my mind is a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible 'the corpus of objectified knowledge about us' … [I see this as] …not to produce the 'truth' of the Indigenous position but to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understandings of Indigenous people is caught up and implicated in its work. (Nakata, 2007, 213 - 217).

Nakata's interrogation of the term 'truth' alerts us to its discursive nature and its institutional status as something that can be located and exercised, within colonial contexts, usually in the hands of non-Indigenous people. Truth claims have a great deal of influence on educational systems and systems of knowledge generally. If Western education systems present certain types of knowledge to Indigenous students as 'fact' and this knowledge conflicts with Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world, how then is this 'truth' challenged, and how, if at all, are non-Indigenous 'truth-holders' encouraged to re-think their knowledge base? These are pertinent questions in the teaching of Indigenous Studies where alternative and indeed, oppositional ways of knowing are introduced into our teaching and learning program. This is not for the purpose of dissension *per se*; rather, the instating of other ways of thinking and understanding the world formulate a basis for critical thinking, a desirable attribute in the outcome of many university subjects. And dissension from a place of critical inquiry often forms a basis for the existing 'truths' of Western knowledge to be challenged.

In the broad and varied realm of Indigenous knowledges, knowledge as an ontological foundation for understanding the world is communicated in a multitude of ways that formulate various local and communal knowledge systems. These systems include all forms

of linguistic and creative expressions. They engage the senses, social systems and customs, along with all forms of creative expression including religious and/or spiritual beliefs, land management, relations with living and non living entities, rituals of managing combat and dissent, social and recreational rituals, technologies, and ways of managing change. In a contemporary context, this can be expanded to include communicative methods of modern technology and pedagogical practices both within and outside of mainstream institutions. Indigenous knowledges thus tend not to be discrete. Indigenous scientific knowledges incorporate spiritual belief, as Deloria tells us, "American Indians look at events to determine the spiritual activity supporting or undergirding them ... Indians know that human beings must participate in events…[and] thus obtain information from birds, animals, rivers, and mountains which is inaccessible to modern science (1997, 40) Similarly, in Australian Aboriginal cultures, the Dreaming acts as a template for belief, behaviour, understanding and Law that cannot be reduced to singular identifiable 'disciplines' but rather comes from tens of thousands of years of observance, storytelling and experience.

The Teaching-Research Nexus

Including our own research in our teaching and learning strategies is one way to demonstrate the viability and integrity of Indigenous knowledges alongside Western knowledges. It allows us to consider knowledge as broad and far-reaching, as multifaceted and always in process. The academics at Woolyungah span several disciplines, and we often use a team-teaching approach so students encounter a range of approaches to disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research. Our work includes collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and communities.

Two of the Indigenous academics focus on secondary school education issues, with one project focussing on the impact of an intensive Aboriginal educational training program on the experiences of pre-service teachers throughout 2008. The program, known as the Enhanced Teacher Training Program (ETTP), is an initiative of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) and is offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. This lecturer has also published on Aboriginal community development issues (Buckskin, 2004, 2005, 2007). The other academic is researching the HSC Aboriginal Studies course examining differences between Aboriginal and Non-

Aboriginal teachers in their approaches to teaching Aboriginal Studies, and has published on various aspects of Aboriginal secondary school education and policy (Wray 1999, 2008).

Three Indigenous academics are creative artists: one a visual artist, one a theatre/dance/music practitioner and academic, and one a writer. The visual artist's current doctoral research examines and engages with the role of arts in Aboriginal community cultural development, particularly in 'urban' communities. The focus of the thesis is to examine historical developments in community and community arts development in Australia, and the impact this has had on the developments in contemporary Aboriginal arts, community cohesion, and individual identity and agency. The writer's research interests include recording Indigenous narratives as contributions to the area of life writing, oral histories and the self-representation of Indigenous peoples in contemporary texts (Blackmore 2008). This person is also extensively involved in regional writers groups and workshops, as well as the 'Blackwords' program in the national AustLit Database. The theatre/dance/music practitioner's M.Litt and Doctoral research concerns intercultural performance exchange and was based in many years of mainstream performance and performance exchange programs between Central Australian and urban Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and groups. Her publications and creative output (Marshall and Beattie 2000, Marshall 2002, 2004) explore multiple intelligences, performance languages, post-colonial re-imaginings of identity and the ways in which education programs all over Australia, at all levels, need to come to terms with the realities of a multi=cultural population and the importance of non-written forms of communication.

One of the non-Indigenous academics is a cultural studies researcher, with interests in critical and cultural theory, Aboriginal histories, issues of race, nation and identity, the study of literary and film texts, and critical pedagogy in Higher Education. Her publications include an analysis of surfing identities that looks at Indigenous surfing and ways of understanding nation and country, Aboriginal filmmaking, and issues in Higher Education (McGloin 2004, 2006). McGloin has also published collaboratively with an Indigenous PhD student on issues of Aboriginal identity and self-representation in Indigenous short film. (Lumby, McGloin, 2009)

One of the non-Indigenous academics is a geographer, with a focus on Indigenous rights and environmental issues. In a recent collaborative publication between this academic

and two students, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, Adams, Cavanagh, & Edmunds (2008), critique contemporary policy and management practices using collaborative research with Aboriginal communities on the north and south coast of NSW. This work explores commonalities and difference in approaches to managing land and seascapes between government conservation agencies and local Aboriginal communities. The work demonstrates that a common characteristic in Aboriginal approaches to caring for Country is the acknowledgement of new species and the disappearance of others, which opposes the colonial fantasy of a 'pristine' landscape divided into areas selected for protection. This view also challenges much contemporary environmental orthodoxy that suggests the possibility of a 'fixed' or unchanging ecology. Cavanagh's research offers another example pertaining to her own Bundjalung Country. Taking issue with regulation imposed by the *NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act*, Cavanagh notes that the wording of this Act is insufficient, and that "the premise in which Indigenous knowledges are sought to be included in threatened species management is flawed, with Indigenous knowledges of nature being secondary to Western scientific knowledges." (p.37). Edmunds collaborates with Aboriginal fisher families to examine how contemporary fisheries regulation impacts on historic cultural patterns, perversely acting against sustainable fisheries practice. However, rather than just critiquing Western practices, these and other projects focus on demonstrating the potential for *complementarity* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems.

Clearly there is a broad range of interests and expertise across these academic staff members. Academics collaborate with each other in different combinations, and with their students. These collaborations are cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural. Facilitating student engagement with this research can support acknowledgement of the place of Indigenous knowledges in successful contemporary practices, linking the theory with real world outcomes. And importantly, we learn from one another in an environment where competitiveness is not the primary focus as we learn to incorporate knowledges from one another and present to the students broader and more comprehensive approaches to learning.

Embedding Indigenous knowledges in the teaching and learning landscape

There are many ways in which Indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into curricula, or embedded into teaching and learning outcomes. One imperative is the right of

Indigenous people themselves to teach about 'ways of knowing' their own culture at any academic level, and the University's need to recognise that many Elders and knowledgeable people already have the equivalent of a PhD in cultural knowledge in their own communities, and in many instances can be employed by Universities through the creation of adjunct or associate positions. Staff development assistance and other benefits should also be made available. Locally-based teaching of cultural knowledge can be encouraged, and programmes set up to proliferate local histories, stories, and knowledges that are not always documented. Our research shows that it makes no sense to do 'in depth' studies of distant but 'colourful' Indigenous communities while remaining ignorant of the communities on the local doorstep; many of our students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous express a keen interest in local Indigenous culture, and where this is introduced, avidly participate in learning whether at the level of academic inquiry or field work. While local communities may not be 'traditional' (in the tourism sense of the word), many are in their country and many have lived here all their lives, negotiating the forced changes with great tenacity. Also, cultural revival is strong in many communities and educators in Indigenous Studies need to be as aware of local changes as we are of the shifting political climate that we are now witnessing in Indigenous issues generally.

Taking into consideration the logistics of guest speakers and our own committed efforts to ensure students have access to the wealth of local knowledge available, we now consider how Indigenous knowledge can be entrenched in practical ways into undergraduate courses in Indigenous Studies. It is the case that Indigenous ways of knowing have been marginalised worldwide. This has been integral to the project of colonisation; in order to conquer and subdue, a process of subordination is necessary and the outlawing of culture is an effective way of subjugating cultural knowledges. In the process of dispossession, many knowledge systems have been lost alongside countless languages and the capacity to articulate cultural ways of knowing. However, Indigenous knowledge as this exists on a local level for Aboriginal people has in many cases, been preserved by Elders and passed on to younger generations through various pedagogical methods and modes of transmission, for example, through orality, drawing, painting, song, dance and theatre. In the Illawarra, for example, Dreaming stories have been preserved and are frequently shared at local Welcome to Country events. In our teaching, we encourage students to locate sources for local

Dreaming stories. We promote the circulation of these as valuable narratives that tell local histories and comprise a set of knowledges and mythologies that inform local Indigenous culture and sustain its continuity. Staff at Woolyungah incorporate a variety of methodologies into their respective teaching and learning practices: painting stories, field trips to Indigenous sites, readings that refer directly to Indigenous knowledges, and critical theories in the discipline of Indigenous Studies. The latter, drawing from Indigenous and Western sources, provide us with ideas and explanations in academic language, but they are merely part of what we do. Some of our teaching practices take students out of the university domain and into Indigenous domains. On-country visits where students interact with Aboriginal Elders provide powerful learning experiences while simultaneously acknowledging the expertise of these Elders and paying respect to knowledge that is shared. Elders typically demonstrate very significant empirical knowledge of their lands, expressed in a cultural framework that acknowledges the sacredness of these homelands. Students in such teaching and learning contexts learn what cannot be taught in classrooms and lecture theatres; on-country visits are experiential and demand direct interaction with members from other cultures. They bring together theory and practice, practice and theory.

Different knowledge domains challenge students to question taken-for-granted assumptions. This applies to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The quotes below are taken from student reflective journals:

> *'Knowledge systems…what does this term mean to me?.. [our lecturer] mentioned that some of the things he learned he did not in the western system of learning. Indigenous methods are experiential learning rather than abstract like the western system. I wonder if I would be able to tell the difference. Have I already experienced both systems of learning? Knowledge is so important, I have been told everyday by my teachers and by family. But what is knowledge? Who has the right to teach and say that things are the way they are? Who can challenge these people/theories? [Our lecturer] has the right to teach because he has a PhD. Who is to say that his teaching method is wrong or he's giving us wrong information?...If [our lecturer] were to take us out of the lecture room and into the environment, if he taught us the way, say, that Indigenous elders taught us would he be allowed to do that under the University's protocols? If people didn't know about a PhD would they listen to what [our lecturer]*

was teaching? All of these things get me thinking…who has Knowledge and who has the authority to deny the use of that knowledge?' (Indigenous student 2007)

Having guest speakers (especially Aboriginal) is a great way of making the subject more 'real' and 'alive'. Hearing of the Stolen Generation from someone who experienced it is much more touching and realistic than just reading facts from books. (non-Indigenous student 2007).

I have listened to [our lecturer] for seven weeks, and it wasn't until I heard [an Aboriginal guest lecturer] speak that I understood what [our lecturer] had been talking about. (non-Indigenous student 2004).

'Being an Indigenous person in this subject has its benefits, you can relate to the issues and topics covered on a regional and local scale. You also have your previous knowledge and associations with Aboriginal people and networks. I have learnt many things from Aboriginal people in the past that has not been recorded in written text…Is there more value reading a text or living the experience?...I think what I am trying to express is how you interpret the reading material, you've got to look hard at the text and draw your own conclusions. I didn't think reading could be such a chore but it is filling in some of the blanks. (Indigenous student 2007)

'I have 3 full pages of notes from the talk [the Indigenous Elder] gave us, and it was an eye-opening experience… This was my first true engagement with the material, and it brought things together in a sense…I noticed she used many Aboriginal words, and it finally made sense why [our lecturer] used them in class and found them important. Translations are never verbatim, especially when there are so many concepts whitefelleas could never fully understand.' (Study Abroad student 2007).

These comments demonstrate transformative learning experiences: the learning process is taken to a new level by the need to engage with different ways of knowing about

the world. In some respects what is most significant and interesting here is again the notion of complementary knowledge sets: students apply their critical thinking skills to *both* Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. This process opens new ways of thinking about the world that demonstrate the usefulness of collaboration.

Returning to our framework and the issues of power through which much Western knowledge is formulated and taught, our praxis operates from a desire to expand existing knowledge systems. The "field of presence" (Foucault, 1972: 57) that is science in this kind of praxis becomes a collaboration of thoughts, ideas, experiences and applications that students acquire not merely through a lecturer, but from experience and discussion. Elders and Indigenous teachers 'bring to life' the theory and enact knowledge systems that can combine with Western ways of knowing in productive and collaborative ways.

Collaboration: Effective Pedagogy in Practice

Although clearly the process of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics is approached from different cultural standpoints, we are aware of the similarities we share and the intersections of gender, age, class, as well as race and cultures, as these position us in collaborative settings. But while cultural differences position us in different ways, we have enough similarities to draw from to effect a successful collaborative teaching and learning environment. This is not to suggest that cultural difference is not an issue; on the contrary, it is an historical factor that cannot be ignored. Nakata warns of the dangers of appropriation and distortion of Indigenous knowledge by non-Indigenous academics as he balances this possibility with a view that non-Indigenous people need to be part of the dialogue. (Nakata, 2004) As Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators in writing, we can affirm the power and satisfaction of collaborative efforts, of learning to listen, and applying our skills in consultation with one another. This is not always an easy task. The academy produces academics according to Western ways of knowing that demand adherence to the ethos of the individual, and the production of 'factual' knowledge. And as noted elsewhere (McGloin, 2008), for non-Indigenous academics, *un-learning* is crucial to any possibilities for useful contribution to an Indigenous-focused praxis. This can occur between student and learner, between Indigenous and non Indigenous collaborators, and is always, as are all social situations, governed by relations of power that favour Western knowledges, to re-cite Foucault, insufficient knowledges are disqualified. Collaborations provide an effective way of

reinstituting Indigenous knowledges by balancing the institutionally ego-driven efforts to speak authoratively on the one hand, with the need to listen, reflect and support Indigenous standpoints on the other. This does not necessarily mean that effective collaboration requires a wholesale deference to all Indigenous viewpoints; indeed, it is more complex than that. Effective interchange require a fundamental re-thinking of the ways in which Western knowledge is institutionally validated and hierarchised to occupy a favourable position in all teaching and learning contexts. Effective interaction means displacing that dualism by learning to conceive of the world outside of the space of colonial authority. It requires, then, a contemplation of different *epistemes*[ii]. Most importantly, though, in our experience, it demands trust and collegiality and respect for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In the course of our research throughout the *Leading the Way* project, our focus was often redirected to what it is we do and how we go about doing it effectively in collaboration. Indigenous knowledge, in the context of our teaching, is primarily local knowledge that can be taught by local Elders, visiting Indigenous guests, and by those whose knowledge of local Indigenous histories is passed on through oral narrative, and Indigenous publications in the form of academic or creative works. We teach across the University's satellite campuses and this often provides opportunities for local knowledge to be brought in and shared. The sharing of this knowledge provides both non-Indigenous educators and students opportunities to re-think what they 'know' and to destabilise the authority of Western knowledge in ways that are productive to the teaching and learning process. Indigenous knowledges can also be conceptualised in a broad context that examines human relationships with land, and other species, and is capable of enlightening both non-Indigenous educators and students about the possibilities for expanding our knowledge base in ways that endorse ways of knowing that are not integral to Western epistemology, but can be complimentary to it. The testimonials of our students tell us that we are 'on the right track'. However, we are cognizant that our initial efforts are merely a starting point and that our research must continue to reflect a developing practice where Indigenous knowledges must formulate the focal framework for Indigenous Studies.

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[i] See http://www.wipce2008.com/

[ii] We draw here from Foucault's use of this term to describe a "total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalised systems" (Foucault, 1972, 191). In this instance, a different episteme therefore refers to the manifold ways in which we, as a set of culturally and disciplinary diverse teachers, can contribute to a set of discursive practices that will incorporate and foreground Indigenous ways of knowing.