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CDSI Plenary: Widening participation, social inclusion, closing the gap

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As Australian universities across the country adjust to the Federal Government's forward vision of a socially inclusive society, widening participation strategy, low SES initiative and the closing the gap agenda, much can be learned from the decades of federal government priorities for Indigenous access, participation and outcome in higher education studies. In this Open Lecture, Prof. Nakata will sketch out the gains made in the transition of Indigenous students to higher education studies, the complex dimensions of supporting learning pathways of students without the necessary ATAR scores, and the need to rethink the formal learning situation in which these learners now participate in higher education studies.

Key Words: social inclusion, Indigenous students, standpoint theory.

1. Introduction

The widening participation and lower SES agenda has a range of implications for universities. Some of us might wish that the strategy held more implications for secondary schools than for universities. But no, that would make too much sense. It seems that universities must become even more active in schools, raising low SES students' aspirations, mentoring them to select subjects that will increase their chances for entry into university programs, and of course helping to raise funds for scholarships and accommodation along the way to enable them to participate in higher education. And all that before universities begin the process of supporting these students to succeed.

As the Indigenous higher education sector knows from long experience, widening access and participation does not lead to social inclusion unless institutions change their practices to facilitate it. Nor does widening access and participation for individuals automatically ensure successful outcomes. The Indigenous experience is that the easy part is getting students in, but once in, the real challenges begin. This is because access and participation for Indigenous people brings with it high levels of academic under-preparation, and for many, high levels of unfamiliarity with the ways and workings of universities, across the entire range of their administrative, academic and social contexts.

Indigenous academic under-preparation, of course, has its roots in the inter-generational colonial legacy, which continues to impact on communities, families and individuals. Indigenous students often have not had the benefits of commensurate education, either because they are old enough to have been denied access to 12 years of schooling or because schooling continues to fail to engage our students in formal learning situations. The alienation of Indigenous students from the schooling process is not restricted to them but something shared with many low SES students.

This reality of academic under-preparation for Indigenous students, while always slowly improving, is also with us for some time yet. And we only have to look at the most recent round

of schooling statistics to get the picture. A recent DEEWR report demonstrates there has been an average increase of 30% in the number of Indigenous students participating in Australia's education sectors between 2001 and 2008, with the highest occurring in preschool (34.7%), 31.3% in secondary school, 27% in the VET sector, and 10% at the higher education level (DEEWR, 2008). The DEEWR report also shows a significant concentration of participating Indigenous students in NSW and QLD secondary schools (29.4% of all Indigenous students Australia wide in both states) (DEEWR, 2008). However, if we drill down into areas of performance NSW retention rates fall way behind Queensland and below the median.

Interestingly, if we look more closely at the levels of outcome at Year 12 across the country we can see a 13.6% increase in the number of students who gained an ATAR score between 2005 and 2008 (DEEWR, 2008). However, when compared against the number of completions, and if you take just the 2007 figures, about 10% of these emerge with an ATAR score. If we add in the NSW figures, that proportion in 2007 is quite small. If you then consider that we had enrolled 1,229 students into NSW university courses in the following year, you get a better sense of what under-preparation of students actually mean for universities. About 5% of our enrolments in NSW entered with ATAR scores (DEEWR, 2008).

2. Supporting Indigenous students

Over the years, I have often thought that Indigenous centres have been well ahead of the general student support game in universities because Indigenous centres have been around for just over three decades now specifically to provide pastoral support and organise appropriate academic support for its Indigenous students, and sometimes to develop and run specially tailored programs for Indigenous students.

Indigenous centres have had a multi-faceted approach which includes orientation, enabling courses, supplementary courses, tutorial assistance, often providing integrated approaches to academic skills development, the development of culturally appropriate pedagogy or assessment techniques, general advocacy and intervention and so forth to keep our students in study.

However, in the last decade I have been working in research areas as well as the student support areas and I would have to say that it has become increasingly clear that we need to do a bit of re-thinking in the way we organise and prioritise in Indigenous support centres. One need only consider the burgeoning transition, student engagement, and academic skills support literature that has emerged in universities over the same period in response to increasing student diversity, to begin to realise just how disconnected Indigenous support practices are from the wider field of activity. Yes, there are many common practices but on the whole, there are entrenched practices in our context that do not always fully recognise just what the academic demands are on under-prepared students.

There is another important change occurring in Indigenous higher education. And this is exactly what is occurring generally in universities. Indigenous students are coming into university from increasingly diverse socio-economic circumstances. We can no longer assume who our students are or what their motivation and interests are. Further to this, Indigenous students are entering a larger range of faculties. Where once most students were in the humanities or law or special programs in health or management, now they are increasingly entering, indeed they are being strongly recruited into non-traditional areas, including the hard sciences, business, medicine, and the mainstream health sciences. We currently have over thirty students for instance studying medicine at UNSW.

What this means is that some of the old and practised arguments that have been made in the interests of Indigenous student progress or success are no longer sustainable. For example, what constitutes success in medicine is not negotiable on behalf of Indigenous students' special needs or circumstances. Either students qualify to become doctors or they don't. And yet these arguments for different measures of success persist right through to the doctoral level.

So what makes a good argument in the interests of participation and access does not always serve students' best interests. Social inclusion strategies then must find better ways to attend to

providing students' access to the knowledge, discourses, and literacies of the disciplines while also attending to the needs and circumstances of Indigenous students. That requires both a larger re-contextualisation of the Indigenous position viv-a-vis the disciplines and much closer attention to the demands of the disciplines on Indigenous students and to re-think what they require to be academically supported for equal success..

Attention to those things must resist positioning Indigenous students as already known and understood. But it must also be responsive to Indigenous concerns about the dangers for Indigenous students of uncritical immersion in the knowledge, logic and practices of the disciplines. If we want Indigenous doctors to be doctors first, then how are we to produce doctors who can generate more effective medical practices for Indigenous people?

Somewhere in the mix, we have to re-think these associations and disconnects that are placing enormous burdens on Indigenous students and graduates to be the ones who solve Indigenous problems, without thinking about what we are really expecting of them. Do we educate Indigenous medical graduates to solve Indigenous health problems? Or do we educate Indigenous doctors to be doctors who might be effective at solving Indigenous health problems if they are so motivated. Not because they are Indigenous but because they are good doctors with some awareness of the complex intersections between traditional health, historical legacies and modern medical discourses. And if we can do this for Indigenous medical students, then why not for all medical students?

Indigenous academics have been calling for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into disciplines and courses. But that project also takes us away from Indigenous students' academic under-preparation into another area and becomes more about changing the practices of the institution and their disciplines.

It seems then, that we need to be posting up two challenges, as Jill Lawrence at USQ has argued in the diversity and transition literature:

1. challenging students to change in order to master the knowledge, discourses and literacies of the university, and
2. challenging universities to change some of their teaching and learning practices to promote the inclusion of the social realities and experiences of low SES students, of all kinds, so that they come to an understanding of the usefulness and utility of knowledge generation by thinkers such as themselves.

Our experience in the Indigenous sector has seen a weighting in our arguments to force institutional accommodation, which is rightly so. But less priority has really been given to re-assuring Indigenous students that their task is also to come to know and understand the knowledge and practices of the disciplines. Here Marcia Langton was right when writing in *The Australian* recently viz., that lack of mastery when we make it too easy, or intervene too much on their behalf. Our interventions need to be more in the area of learning, managing them as students at risk, tracking and monitoring their progress, and providing timely assistance where they need to decode the knowledge of disciplines. Too often, our assistance comes after the fact of failure, at the point of full-blown crisis, when it is all but too late.

3. The locale of the learner

For a while now I have been researching and writing about Australian Indigenous education issues. Like you all, I have seen much good work and learnt much from what is going on across the country and internationally to improve outcomes for Indigenous learners in formal education processes. And still we go on with the struggle.

More recently, I have taken to looking at Indigenous Knowledge systems for answers about who the Indigenous learner is today, as shown in Figure 1.
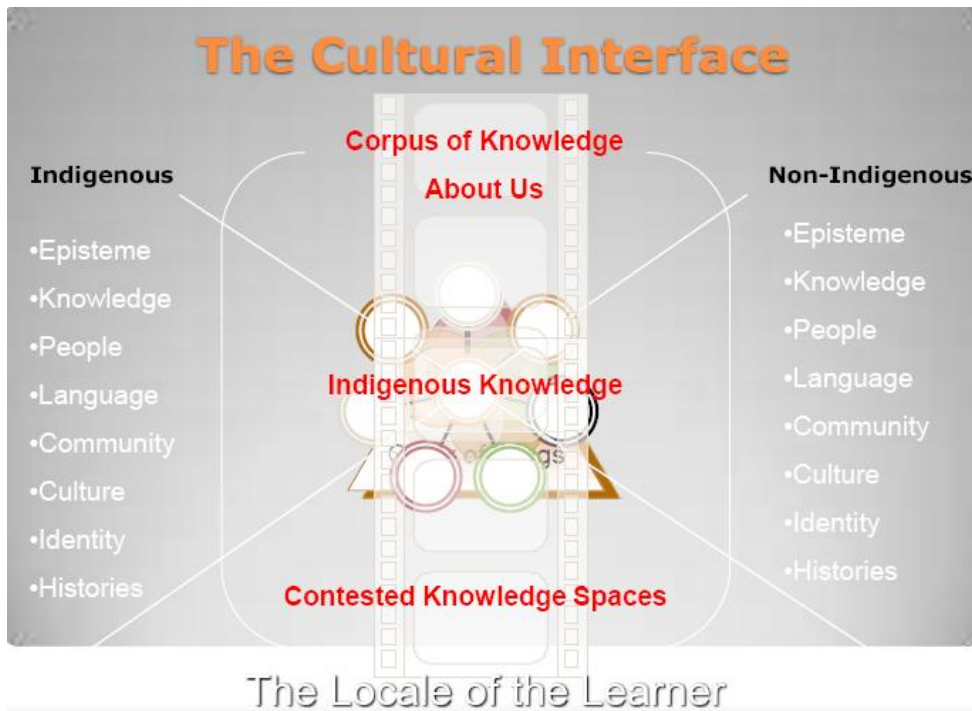
Figure 1. The cultural interface

In this locale Indigenous students are discursively constituted as subjects vis-à-vis that matrix of abstracted discourses that constructs a consciousness of ourselves which is outside of the local, outside of how life is experienced according to Dorothy Smith. And it is via understanding what constitutes and is constitutive of Indigenous experience in this locale that educators need to re-theorise Indigenous students as prospective learners. Whatever the particularities of their prior experiences, learners come into university programs already variously constituted and positioned discursively to take up the knowledge, which has inscribed their position.

The socio-historical discourses which have constituted their position are, in this learning context, organised and given their order through the disciplines and the corpus, through a Western order of things. Some of the theoretical framings within this order have come to form a commonsense and consensus position about the Indigenous community. Contestation of knowledge for example is easier for students at content and ideological levels within these accepted positions. Contestation is also easier if sites of interrogation are considered in terms of simple intersections.

But, Indigenous students often feel the contradictions and tensions within having to align to one or the other, especially when they see weaknesses in examples and arguments on both sides of the divide. It is more difficult to problematise the major theoretical concepts and pursue inter-subjective mapping of our many relationships at the cultural interface because these demand explication of broader sets of discursive relations beyond the literal interpretation of the text or the theoretical framings within a particular approach to a topic.

For example, when we deploy the concept of sovereignty or of self determination how are those situated within wider sets of discursive relations of colonial discourse, legal discourse, rights discourse and so on. How has it provided a priori conditions to our thinking? How does it frame thinking in a range of implicated areas of practice. How does our subscription to it allow or not allow certain sorts of discussion about it. And when is it possible that we can talk of something else to achieve our goals? For instance, when legal-political concepts work through and are constituted in complex relations with anthropological discourse and on into health or education, and are then further complicated by the apparatuses of policy and managerial and bureaucratic discourse, how are these all to be brought to the surface? How are students to suspend accepted thinking in one area without suspending allegiance to Indigenous interests? Can they take up other positions without being tagged essentialist or assimilationist? If so, what are they?

Not opening up theoretical positions for more complicated discussion means that the dynamics of the cultural interface is sutured over in favour of the Western order of things and its constitution of what an Indigenous opposition should be.

Indigenous learners also often do not have a fully articulated experiential basis for contesting knowledge. In that much cultural practice is implicitly understood it is often difficult for Indigenous students to contest the interpretations of the corpus on the basis of what they know of their own culture. For example, the inner workings of customary adoption are not always revealed to young students. They may know enough to be uneasy with an anthropological or legal interpretation but not certain enough of their own knowledge to make some sort of counter-claim. This uneasiness has to be suspended to make sense of legal discourse. The choice becomes one between silence or laying themselves open to challenge from the more authoritative elements of the corpus.

How are Indigenous learners to be supported to explore their experiential knowledge beyond the classroom and to bring it in to inform how particular Indigenous positions are contested via engagement with the corpus? The learner, in reaching a position under these conditions must suspend one or the other. They cannot easily forge understanding without being called into alignment with one position or the other. The learner does not have opportunities for developing ways of reading, ways of critically engaging within accepted Indigenous discourse, as this is itself constituted within wider sets of social relations, without betraying accepted positions within the Indigenous body politic. Thus it is difficult to work through the inherent tensions of the everyday world. Currently professional preparation is inadequate in terms of equipping graduates to work two knowledge systems together in the interest of better practice. So how can we navigate the complexities of this contested space?

4. An Indigenous standpoint theory

Since the early 1990s, I have investigated possibilities with standpoint theory and, in particular, an Indigenous standpoint as a theoretical position that might be useful -- something from the everyday and not from some grand narrative. However this has not been easy. The term standpoint is often substituted for perspective or viewpoint, but these do not adequately represent the use of the term in theory, which is quite complex and contested as a theoretical approach. Feminist standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to deal with the problem of articulating women's experience of their world as organised through practices of knowledge production, and which theorised women's positions as rational, logical outcomes of the natural order of things, when in fact they were socially constructed positions that were outcomes of particular forms of social organisation that supported the position an authority of men over women (Smith, 1987).

As a method of enquiry, standpoint theory was utilised by a diversity of marginalised groups whose accounts of experience were excluded or subjugated within intellectual knowledge production. However, analysis from the standpoint of people's everyday experience is not the aggregation of stories from lived experience. It is not the endless production of subjective narrative to disrupt objectified accounts. According to Polhaus, it works off the premise that first the social position of the knower is epistemically significant; where the knower is socially positioned will both make possible and delimit knowledge. Second, more objective knowledge is not a product of mere observation or a disinterested perspective on the world, but is achieved by struggling to understand one's experience through a critical stance on the social order within which knowledge is produced (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 285).

Standpoint accounts, then, depend on reflexivity and the distinction between experience and standpoint (Pohlhaus, 2002). Bringing the situation of ourselves as knowers into the frame does not make ourselves the focus of study but will involve investigating the social relations within which we as "'knowers' know" (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 287). This will also involve knowing where to look, and which social relations might be informing our knowledge. Importantly, and to borrow again from Polhaus, being ... [an Indigenous knower] does not yield a ready-made critical stance on the world, but rather the situation of ... [Indigenous knowers] provides the

questions from which one must start in order to produce more objective knowledge (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 287).

Standpoint, then, does not refer to a particular social position, but rather is an engagement with the kinds of questions found there (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 287), and this engagement moves us along to forge, following Harding, a critical Indigenous standpoint. An Indigenous standpoint, therefore, has to be produced. It is not a simple reflection of experience and it does not pre-exist in the everyday waiting to be brought to light. It is not any sort of hidden wisdom that Indigenous people possess. It is a distinct form of analysis, and is itself both a discursive construction and an intellectual device to persuade others and elevate what might not have been a focus of attention by others. It is not deterministic of any truth, but it lays open a basis from which to launch a range of possible arguments for a range of possible purposes. These arguments still need to be rational and reasoned; they need to answer to the logic and assumptions on which they are built. Arguments from this position cannot assert a claim to truth that is beyond the scrutiny of others on the basis that as a member of the Indigenous community, what I say counts. It is more the case, that what is said must be able to be accounted for.

This, then, is not an Indigenous way of doing knowledge. Rather, it argues for what Harding calls strong objectivity (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 285) by bringing in accounts of relations that knowers located in more privileged social positions are not attentive to. It is a particular form of investigation. It is the explication and analysis of how the social organisation and practices of knowledge through its various apparatuses and technologies of the textual production process organise and express themselves in that everyday, as seen from within that experience. People's lived experience at the interface is the point of entry for investigation, not the case under investigation. It is to find a way to explore the actualities of the everyday and discover how to express them conceptually from within that experience, rather than depend on or deploy predetermined concepts and categories for explaining experience.

Standpoint theory has not developed as a singular theory but has congealed around different interpretations of other theories associated with Marxist approaches, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. It has come under a lot of criticism and has fallen somewhat out of favour (see Moore & Muller, 1999; Walby, 2000). Criticisms have been levelled at its weaknesses: the defeatism of what some call the tendency to epistemic relativism; the endless fragmentation across categories of difference; an unfortunate emphasis on who can know rather than what can be "known"; the preoccupation with politics of identity and location that reify boundaries between groups who also have common concerns; and the containment of politics and action to recognition and location rather than redistribution and transformation. These weaknesses need to be engaged with so that accounts can be produced that articulate forms of agency created in local sites through the social organisation of knowledge and its technologies, and which give content to how people engage and participate in and through them.

Standpoint theory in my mind is a method of enquiry, a process for making more intelligible the corpus of objectified knowledge about us as it emerges and organises our lived realities. I see this as theorising knowledge from a particular and interested position, not to produce the truth of the Indigenous position or the awful truth of the dominant colonial groups, but to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understanding of Indigenous people is caught up and is implicated in its work.

This to me is a useful starting point for a first principle of an Indigenous standpoint theory; viz., that Indigenous people are entangled in a much contested knowledge space at the cultural interface, in a particular locale. It would therefore begin from the premise that my social position is discursively constituted within and constitutive of complex sets of social relations as expressed through the social organisation of my everyday. As an interested "knower", I am asking to understand how I come to understand – to know within the complexities at the interface where our experience is constituted in and constitutive of the corpus.

A second useful principle for an Indigenous standpoint theory would recognise Indigenous agency as framed within the limits and the possibilities of what I can know from this constituted

position – to recognise that at the interface we are constantly being asked to be both continuous with one position at the same time as being discontinuous with another (Foucault, 1972). This is experienced as push-pull between Indigenous and not-Indigenous positions. That is, the familiar confusion with constantly being asked at any one moment to both agree and disagree with any proposition on the basis of a constrained choice between whitefella or blackfella perspective. For me, this provides a means to see my position in a particular relation with others, to maintain myself with knowledge of how I am being positioned, and to defend a position if I have to.

A third and connected principle that may usefully be incorporated is the idea that the constant tensions that this tug-of-war creates are physically real, and both informs as well as limits what can be said and what is to be left unsaid in the everyday. To factor this tension in helps us to get beyond notions of structuralist power and the resultant causal analyses. This will allow us a more sophisticated view of the tensions created between Indigenous and non-Indigenous dualities, not as the literal translation of what is said or written in propositions, but the physical experience and memory of such encounters in the everyday, and to include them as part of the constellation of a priori elements that inform and limit not just the range but the diversity of responses from us.

Here is what I have learned over the years: what all learners need most is an understanding of the political nature of their position, and that requires both the language and the knowledge of how that positioning is effected in the everyday world. They also need a way of maintaining themselves in the face of it, as well as working against that knowledge system that continues to hold them to the position that it has produced for them. The work ahead with widening opportunities for those who have not had traditionally participated in higher education studies will not be easy but it will pave the way for the many that are yet to come.

5. Conclusion

Let me conclude with some take away points. First, to widen participation in the higher education sector we must maintain focus on gaining the best fit between students, learning, teaching, and future professions; and allow ourselves liberties to use everything at our disposal to achieve the best result for our students. It is radically dumb to discard or not explore things that we know to work but not use them because they come from dominant or white traditions.

Second, we need to recognise that our students live in a very difficult and complex space, and ensure that we do not conflate our understanding of this here and now with an imagined distant past that can be brought forward to reconfigure a simpler traditional future bounded off and separated from the global.

Third, we need to keep in focus that future graduates into professions must be able to work in complex and changing terrains. And let's start with the fact that Indigenous learners are already familiar with complexities of the cultural interface.

Fourth, we need curriculum designs to build on these capacities and to create opportunities for learners to achieve a balance of knowledge, skills and processes for exploring disciplinary boundaries, and not deceive ourselves that the right content will produce better outcomes of itself.

And fifth, and very importantly, educators need themselves to develop their scholarship in contested knowledge spaces of the cultural interface and achieve for themselves some facility with how to engage and move students through the formal learning process.

If we hold on to some of these basics as we move forward with our work, come together annually to review and discuss what works and what doesn't, we would have begun the important journey of closing the gap.

Acknowledgements

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