

“It’s a safe environment for us Indigenous students” – Creating a culturally safe learning space for Indigenous Pre-Tertiary students

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Introduction

In Australia tertiary enabling or ‘bridging’ programs have been introduced as alternative entry pathways to address the still proportionally low numbers of certain marginal groups accessing and being successful in Higher Education. Included in these marginal groups are Indigenous students. In the mainstream these enabling programs tend to focus on the academic skills required for success at a first year University level. However, one program that has been specifically designed for Indigenous students has recognised that these students benefit from a more holistic approach. The Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program, which is part of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE) - a partnership between Batchelor Institute and Charles Darwin University – takes a multifaceted approach to enabling education. At the centre of this approach is the knowledge that it has been designed specifically for Indigenous students and is shaped by the concepts of cultural safety, ‘Both Ways’ learning and the cultural interface.

Review of literature on Cultural Safety for Indigenous students

According to Hunt (2013) the concept of cultural safety was first introduced and explored by Maori nurses working in New Zealand. Much of this scholarship is based on nursing environments in New Zealand, Australia and many other countries with multicultural populations. Some work on cultural safety has been done, however, in the area specific to Indigenous students in the education and Higher Education space. Bin Sallik’s (2003 p 21) work is the most seminal of these. She defined cultural safety as the ‘provision of an emotionally and physically safe environment in which there was shared respect and no denial of identity’. The terms cultural safety and cultural competence are often used somewhat interchangeably (Hunt, 2013; Perso, 2012). Hunt (2013) discusses the concept of cultural competence as ‘knowledge of culture’ and asserts that “the conceptual framework of cultural competence includes a spectrum of three components: cultural awareness and beliefs, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills” (Hunt, 2013, p. 768).

Hunt (2013, p. 769) goes on to explain that cultural safety is related to cultural competence in that it is a way of describing the ethics of intercultural interactions. It is about the relationships between people and how well each person understands that they have their own beliefs and morals, partially based on their culture. Cultural safety is more than cultural competence, awareness and sensitivity. It encompasses these ideas but extends beyond them to create a safe space for this difference. Bin Sallik (2003) asserts that,

“cultural safety extends beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. It empowers individuals and enables them to contribute to the achievement of positive outcomes. It encompasses a reflection on individual cultural identity and recognition of the impact of personal culture on professional practice” (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 21).

Perso (2012) also invokes the term ‘cultural responsiveness’ suggesting that ‘cultural responsiveness results from cultural competence which respects and values the unique identity’ of students. She talks about the importance of using a cultural lens which helps teachers in particular to see each student and their relationships from the perspective of their own family and community rather than our their own. Person (2012) asserts that this perspective ensures that cultural bias is not part of the response. This seems a big claim, but greater cultural competence and responsiveness in teachers certainly helps to create a culturally safe environment for Indigenous student.

Bin Sallik (2003) points to the colonial legacy of education as the reason we need to observe cultural safety for Indigenous students now. She highlights that the ‘White colonial environment (that) was devoid of any sort of cultural safety provisions for Indigenous Australians. This resulted in many of the early students being overwhelmed and dropping out of these institutions’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22). She also raises this as an ongoing issue for Indigenous students,

“by the early 1970s Indigenous Australians had undergone a number of debilitating processes decreed by successive government policies based on scientific racism that served to legitimate colonialism and imperialism” (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22).

This institutionalised racism has become normalised in many places and is often invisible to those non-Indigenous people working in such institutions. This results in a culturally unsafe environment for Indigenous students, one where these students ‘have the added stress of trying to cope with discrimination and racism by teachers and the institutional racism inherent within their host institutions. The derogatory representations and misrepresentations of Indigenous Australians in the classrooms, as well as in the literature, exacerbates this’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22). Bin Sallik (2003) notes that although universities do have policies and guidelines for dealing with discrimination and racism, the commitment often seems to be at the rhetorical level rather than the practical.

Bin Sallik (2003) points to the 1967 referendum as a turning point for Indigenous Students and notes the 1970s as an important time of program development specifically for Indigenous students within Universities. These programs were located in enclave environments specifically for Indigenous student cohorts. The programs ‘incorporated Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures and histories as well as social welfare and psychology theories and practices’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 23). She also notes the importance placed within these programs of selecting teaching staff based on experience with and sensitivity to Indigenous peoples. Importantly, Bin Sallik (2003) points out that through these early programs Indigenous students demonstrated that with the right opportunities and intentionally culturally safe environments, success was possible in higher educational despite the fact that they may have not experienced a great deal of success in the primary and secondary levels of education.

Since the 1970s the number of Indigenous students graduating has increased and has led to more Indigenous academics working in the Higher Education and University domain (Bin Sallik, 2003). This has resulted in a broader and deeper conversation that goes beyond a discussion of cultural safety as it relates to the social and emotional needs of Indigenous learners and starts to explore pedagogical and epistemological questions more deeply. In the

1980s and 1990s students and staff at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education were exploring and expanding on the idea of ‘Both Ways’ knowledge and what that looked like in an educational context (Marika 1999, Ober and Bat 2007). This exploration and concept was a way of acknowledging, valuing and placing as central the knowledge language and culture that students bring with them into the formal learning environment. Ober and Bat (2007) explain how the ‘Both Ways’ philosophy of learning helps to create a culturally safe and strong environment,

“While they (students) are learning at Batchelor, they are building on their knowledge and skills. Students have these in both Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning; and in Western knowledge and ways of learning”. (p. 78)

Informed by understandings of ‘Both Ways’ an understanding of cultural safety expands beyond the learning environment itself to include students feeling safe and strong within their own knowledge positions and using this as a foundation to learn new knowledge.

More recently Indigenous academics in particular have argued strongly for the need to move beyond cultural safety and competence and examine how different disciplines have participated in the construction of knowledge about Indigenous and ethnic groups (Walker and Sonn, 2010). Martin Nakata (1998, 2002, 2007a, 2007b) advocates strongly for the need and engage at ‘the cultural interface’ which he names as ‘the contested space between the two knowledge systems’ (1998). Nakata sees this ‘interface’ as a way of supporting Indigenous learners to ‘explore their experiential knowledge beyond the classroom and to bring it in to inform how particular Indigenous positions are contested’ (2007b, p. 11). He argues that learners must have opportunities for developing ways of reading, ways of critically engaging within accepted Indigenous discourse as well as the wider mainstream discourse. Exploration of this idea of the cultural interface has also been taken up by other Indigenous Academics at both theoretical, research and practical levels (Yunkaporta, 2009). Again this idea of the cultural interface expands on previous ideas about academic spaces for Indigenous students. Nakata is suggesting that these students need a space where they can safely but rigorously engage in critical discourse around and between knowledge systems. The safe space here is one of intellectual strength and safety.

In the last decade we have seen other important Indigenous academics exploring aspects of the threats and possibilities for Indigenous people participating in the Higher Education system. Veronica Arbon (2008) explores the power relationships and imbalances between knowledge systems operating in the tertiary education domain. Payi Linda Ford (2010, p. 16) looks at the ‘potential for making landscapes established under Western education cultural regimes culturally safe places for Tyikim teaching and learning’. Karen Booran Mirraboopa Martin (2003) uses a standpoint theory to question notions of ‘the other’ and recognition of worldviews. Chris Sarra (2014) has shone a light on ‘deficit thinking’ in education and the need for ‘high expectations relationships’ in order for Indigenous students to achieve their educational goals. These voices all combine to deepen our understanding of what culturally safe learning actually needs to consist of. It is not enough to simply provide an enclave environment for Indigenous students within the mainstream university context. What is needed is a safe space where students are supported to start from a place of strength and engage in robust, challenging and critical conversations around power, worldviews, epistemologies and identity. This space needs to be one where the expectation is that they will be successful and will move forward into other endeavours even stronger. The benefits of participating in a culturally safe space for Indigenous students is perhaps best summed up by this quote from Lester Irabinna-Rigney (2002) who said,

‘When our (people) engage in the journey of education that does not do violence to their culture, it teaches them to dream of possibilities and not be a prisoner of certainty...Education that welcomes Indigenous identities reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world’ (Rigney 2002, p. 1).

Methodology – Student narratives

Reflective narratives have become a way of supporting PTS students to critically reflect on the learning journey they have taken as well as providing systemic feedback about what is working for students. Within 1-6 months of completion of the PTS course, graduates are contacted by one of the lecturers from the course and asked to tell their ‘story’. The conversations are conducted one to one and the student voice is prioritised without interruption. Students are encouraged to reflect on what they were doing prior to PTS, what provoked them to complete the course, what supported and challenged them during the course and what the road ahead looks like now.

This choice to use narrative in this way was guided by its interconnection between both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. The use of story is widely regarded by writers on Indigenous research methodology both in Australia and internationally to be an appropriate and valid choice for research with and by Indigenous people (Chilisa, 2011; Kahakalau, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Wilson 2008). Stories and metaphors were the original teaching tool used by Indigenous societies. Wilson (2008, p. 17) points out that ‘stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others life experiences through our own eyes. This information may then be internalised in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve.’ It is based on these strong cultural understandings of the centrality of stories for Indigenous people that researchers have sought to incorporate these understandings into a Western research framework. Bessarrah and Ng’andu (2010) explain that yarning, an Indigenous style of conversation or story-telling, also known as narrative, was a cultural match to the cultural processes of Indigenous Australians. This process of ‘yarning’ as described by Bessarrah and Ng’andu (2010) is reflective of the process used in the collection of the PTS student stories.

The following discussion uses a ‘thematic analysis’ approach (Klinger and Murray, 2009). This approach prioritises the process of eliciting understanding and theoretical development from the narratives themselves rather than imposing possible constraints such as a list of questions that can be quantified. Themes emerge from the narratives when considered in their totality. It is important to acknowledge that researchers will generally act as ‘initial filters’ of data. Non-Indigenous researchers in particular must question their underlying assumptions and ensure that they use processes to check their understandings (Pepper and Wildy, 2009). In the case of these stories, each student has had the chance to read, edit and revise their story in order to add emphasis or remove unintended parts of the original telling. Only when the student felt comfortable with the narrative was it considered ‘finished’. At this point, again with the student’s informed consent, the story was published to the publically available blog (www.tertiarysuccess.wordpress.com). Students were made fully aware of the public availability of their story and knew that if for any reason they decided they did not want their story on the website any longer, then it would be removed upon request. Students were also asked specifically for consent for their stories to be examined as part of ethics approved research being undertaken by the PTS lecturers. The purpose of this research was to discover what made a difference to the academic success of students in this preparation stage of their study. A number of key themes have been identified through this research including the important

role of resilience (Hall et al 2015) and the role of cultural safety as explored here. Between 2011 Semester 1 and 2015 Semester 1, twenty-one PTS graduates have had their stories published on the tertiary success blog. Of these, nineteen stories contained references to the centrality of cultural safety, notions of the cultural interface and/or ‘Both Ways’ learning to their personal learning journey. These three themes are discussed below and reinforced by the students’ own voices.

Results – student stories

From the analysis of the student stories we were able to identify themes very similar to those identified in the literature. The students clearly identified having a culturally safe place to learn as being important in their learning journeys. However it was also clear that they equally valued having a learning environment where ‘Both Ways’ learning was central and where their existing knowledge was acknowledged and valued. Finally the students also discussed the significance of a learning space where they were challenged to move their thinking to a new level through the exploration of the cultural interface.

Culturally safe place

Many of the students made reference to the feeling of cultural safety being linked to the fact that all of the students doing PTS are Indigenous. The opportunity to be within an Indigenous cohort made a real difference to the student experience,

It actually made a real difference doing my study at Batchelor/ACIKE where all the students are Aboriginal or from the Torres Strait because you’re more with your people and there’s more understanding. Like when we are there working together we understand each other in a way that is different to when we work with non-Indigenous people... being an Aboriginal person and in an Aboriginal program it helped me learn a lot more about myself and my culture. It’s not something I have to hide away or pretend isn’t there. It is front and centre.

Many of the students reflected on the benefit they gained from interacting with and learning from a wide variety of students in the course, from all over Australia and the Torres Strait,

You learn a lot from different students. There are a wide variety of people that come in, different personalities; ...The experience is very good. It’s a really good and positive environment and it’s good to know that at uni you know you have support behind you in even the smallest of things.In PTS you meet students from all round Australia – Torres Strait, QLD, NSW, Victoria and WA – everyone brings their particular Aboriginal culture with them and then we share it ... When you start yarning with people you realise how much you have in common. I’ve met all these really interesting people from Arnhem Land and Torres Strait and I’ve learnt a lot about Indigenous cultures.

Many students spoke of the sense of confidence that came with both being around other Indigenous people who also wanted to pursue university studies, but also the fact that the space felt safe to ask questions and take risks,

For me, being able to study the Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program on campus at ACIKE was perfect. It's great to be surrounded by other Indigenous people of different ages, all with the same dream to get into tertiary education.

I liked the environment... I can ask lecturers questions and people don't talk down to me. It's a safe environment for us Indigenous students... we've been able to form more of a learning community and we include the new people who are just starting.

Before PTS, when I had an idea I wouldn't share it. But PTS really helped me to know there's no such thing as a stupid question. I feel much more confident to share my ideas. Also I'm much more confident in class.

One student in particular noticed the difference between this environment and her experience at school,

...I remember going to school I think of individual desks, the teacher standing in front of us. There was no laughing and no socialising. PTS is not at all like that. It was a really good mix of people and it quickly put me at ease with asking questions and expressing anything.

Many of the students linked this feeling of cultural safety and support as being something that helped them persist with their studies,

Being so far away from home I didn't know what to expect but when I got there everyone was nice and friendly. When you feel comfortable and happy it makes you want to stay there and keep studying.

...because we're all Aboriginal and Torres Strait there's this spiritual connection, we all share an ancestry line that's so long. We connect because we are one, and we stand together... There's never been any abusive language, no bullying, it's been a safe place all the way along. If it's a safe place then you can concentrate on doing your best.

The PTS students clearly articulated the significance of learning in a culturally safe place where all of the students are Indigenous. They provide connection, support and encouragement to each other as well as having a bond of shared identity. It is also a space for difference, where questions and understandings of indigeneity are explored. It is a space that as Rigney (2002, p. 1) puts it 'welcomes Indigenous Identities (and) reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world' and this provides a strong foundation for learning.

Both Ways learning

Another key aspect to the success the students experienced in PTS was connected to the 'Both Ways' approach to teaching and learning. This is an approach that is fundamental to the delivery model offered by Batchelor Institute over many years and it is a foundational part of the PTS course. Student talked about the difference it made to have their own knowledge acknowledged and valued and also be introduced to a range of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of learning as part of their study,

Before PTS I was a bit quiet and very choosy with my words...I really only spoke up if someone asked me a direct question. I think I was like that because I thought my knowledge wasn't valued by others, so I just kept to myself really. During PTS I gained confidence and I found that everyone's knowledge is valued equally. Learning about both-ways really stood out for me. There were only three Aboriginal people at my school; myself, my brother and another girl who started in Year 9. I don't think the school really knew how to cater for us Aboriginal students. At school I kept my culture to myself as I was scared of being judged. I learnt how to code-switch at a very early age. In PTS I fitted in and with the both-ways approach I was encouraged to share and it was like my knowledge was unlocked from within me. The oral presentations helped to draw out my cultural knowledge; using that tradition of verbal communication and story-telling I believe.

For a number of students the 'Both Ways' approach to learning was something new and was quite challenging at times. However many of them also saw great advantage to the connections they were able to make in their learning by taking a 'Both Ways' approach,

For me the both-ways philosophy has been hard as I don't have that knowledge of Indigenous culture and language. Even though I have Aboriginal heritage from Tasmania, I'm a Western girl. Through my research in books and journals and talking to the other students I'm feeling much more comfortable with the both-ways learning. I am finding it easier to find the words, to be able to express myself in an educational way.

I hadn't heard about both-ways before, it was not something we did at school. I did my reports and essays about midwifery. In my research I learnt about Indigenous Australian ways of birthing and how it is like the Maori people in NZ and the first nations people in Canada. There are a lot of similarities which I didn't know. Both-ways gets you to really think about traditional ways and modern ways and how you can use them together.

Many of the students talked about seeing how they could apply this 'Both Ways' knowledge in both their future studies and in the choice of career paths,

I questioned a lot of things at the start, like I was questioning why we used metaphors all the time, and why 'Both Ways' learning was so important. But I understand that now, that it plays a big role in your learning, especially 'Both Ways'. I'd never heard of that before but now that I understand it, it makes a lot of sense to me and I'm really happy that I've learnt it. I use it in my current study all the time. I can see things clearer; see the bigger picture of how you learn...

PTS got me out of bad habits and now my future looks completely different. Now I can see a career involving academic knowledge, understanding 'Both Ways' – Aboriginal and also Western knowledge. I'm taking with me into my learning journey my Aboriginal awareness and approach but also my Western academic knowledge.

I really enjoyed the developing my understanding of the concept of "both ways learning". I think through schooling were so used to our teaching being all one sided. Now, being Aboriginal I know there's always different ways of learning and

doing things that is helpful to me... after talking to co-ordinators and lecturers and doing the Discipline Inquiry unit I decided I wanted to get into health promotion and particularly in rural Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Graduates of the PTS course see 'Both Ways' learning as an ongoing process in their future journeys. Feeling grounded in their own knowledge traditions and using this as a strong foundation for learning new knowledge provides a form of intellectual safety for the students.

Cultural Interface

Grounded in the 'Both Ways' philosophy the PTS course also gives students the opportunity to extend their understandings even further by exploring what Nakata (2002, 2007b) calls 'the cultural interface' or 'the contested space between knowledge systems'. PTS provides introductory opportunities for students to explore the relationships between knowledge systems, the power dynamics of these relationships and their own standpoint as inhabitants of multiple knowledge systems. This experience has challenged many students to think about knowledge and learning in new ways,

I have really learnt a lot about culture and language from the other students as people come from all different cultures. Mixing with the PTS students I have come to realise that Torres Strait Islander people are also Indigenous and they have their own stories. The people that have their culture, I really think that's great. I look up to them, having knowledge of language and culture – they know who they are and where they belong more than I do...

..I really like the atmosphere at PTS and the way students can have some input into the way things are done...I had a bit of a hard time getting my head around (some) unit(s)... trying to write about both-ways in academic disciplines. I grew up in SA and live in NT but my Aboriginal heritage is from NSW. I've really grown up in a Western society so I don't have that personal connection to land. So while I agree that both-ways is important it's actually quite hard to write about it, putting pen to paper was difficult. But that is good preparation for uni because I know I have to learn to write about things that are not easy to define and understand.

Some students articulated that they had a sense of this 'cultural interface' in their own experience but through PTS they began to have the language and knowledge to talk about it and understand the layers underneath those experiences,

When I started PTS I was hoping to get a lot of knowledge about the western side of society. There is a gap between Aboriginal knowledge and western knowledge. That was my main reason to go into PTS. Why is there this gap? In PTS I saw where both knowledge systems could come together. I haven't had that experience before. At high school it was hard. People didn't want to get to know me, or what knowledge I have within me.

For some students this new way of thinking about things resulted in them reconsidering their study and career pathway,

I've always wanted to go to Uni. I always thought I wanted to study Business Management but after doing PTS I decided to do Law. I changed my mind because

of the work we did on the cultural interface. For example I did some research on the Koori Court and this was a very good example of how Indigenous knowledge could be used in the mainstream western system. I thought if the Koori court can do that, maybe I can do that sort of thing in my community as well. That’s why I wanted to study Law, to maybe help drop the numbers of Indigenous young people who are constantly in and out of detention.

These examples demonstrate that when Indigenous students feel comfortable and accepted in the learning space, when they are in a space where their knowledge is valued and where they are challenged by new ideas, profound and deep learning can occur. This builds an additional layer of intellectual confidence for students which helps them to feel safer in their own knowledge and ideas as they move beyond PTS into the bigger world of Higher Education.

Discussion

What these student stories show us is that cultural safety remains an important part of the equation if Indigenous students are to experience success in Higher Education. However, this culturally safe environment is complex and interactive in nature. The enclave environment with specific supports and shared cultural identity, the sort that Bin Sallik (2003) talked about as having its origins in the 1970s, remains important. Spending time with other Indigenous students from a wide range of backgrounds, language groups and cultures assists the PTS students to make connections with, support and challenge their own identity. It also provides them with an environment where not only is being Indigenous accepted, it is the reality for all students. In this environment the PTS students are then given a mechanism to value their own existing knowledge and that of all students through the ‘Both Ways’ approach to knowledge and learning. This philosophy locates the western knowledge of the University as being only one way of knowing and helps the students feel a sense of balance in their own role as inhabitant of multiple knowledge systems.

While only one of the PTS lecturers at present is Indigenous, the course seeks to address this limitation by prioritising the voices of Indigenous academics from Australia and beyond first and foremost in the content. From this starting point we then include multiple voices from multiple knowledge systems. This helps students to engage with and examine the political and power dynamics that exist within and between knowledge systems. This in turn begins to allow students to understand the cultural interface.

All of these things being are being done in a high expectations environment where the expectation is that students can and will succeed. This is explored further in Hall (2015). They receive support from each other, from the teaching staff and from the learning activities themselves. They also learn to draw support from their home communities in ways that will help them to achieve their goals. PTS students thrive in a culturally supportive and safe learning environment where they can develop and strengthen their own knowledge positions and begin to feel both culturally and intellectually safe, giving them a strong foundation upon which to build their Higher Education experience.

Conclusion

Cultural safety is about more than just providing an enclave environment for Indigenous students, although this still plays a role. However, cultural safety is also about enabling a learning space that values the knowledge that students bring with them, maintains a ‘Both Ways’ approach to learning, utilizes and draws on multiple knowledge systems, highlights

the work and voices of Indigenous academics and provides students with a cultural interface experience to help them re-imagine and strengthen their own knowledge positions. It is with this complex and high expectations experience and grounding that students are then able to move into their continued higher education pathway feeling safe and confident in their own intellectual and cultural knowledge

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