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INDIGENOUS STUDIES: TOOL *of* EMPOWERMENT WITHIN *the* ACADEME

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■ Abstract

In this paper, I consider the importance of Indigenous studies programs, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as critical elements in enabling Indigenous Australian students to engage in the academe in ways that not only allow them to empower themselves, but, ultimately, to become effective change agents within both their own and the wider Australian community. While this paper will highlight the challenges that Indigenous Australians face in their engagement within the university learning environment, it will also reveal the increasingly successful outcomes that are being achieved. A particular focus of the paper will be to acknowledge higher education as a tool of empowerment – a process that enables people to identify and address their own issues, and to use such knowledge and understanding as the platform for personal, positive growth. Finally this paper will contextualise higher education from within an Indigenous perspective to demonstrate how Indigenous studies not only contributes to the empowerment of the individual but also has a critical role in ultimately re-positioning Indigenous Australians in the wider Australian society.

■ Preamble

While the terms “Indigenous Australians” or “Indigenous peoples” have become the accepted terminology to use when referring to Australia’s Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they remain contested terms among many of Australia’s First Nations peoples. I am well aware of the sensitivities that exist around the issue of who should determine what we are called as a collective group. While I appreciate the localised sensitivities, I am also very aware of the complexities surrounding any attempt to determine a single word that could encapsulate, yet represent, the diversity of our peoples. In this paper, I use the term “Indigenous Australians” for the most part but, in recognition of the importance of contextualising our educational journey within an historical frame, I use the terms “Aboriginal” or “Torres Strait Islander” to denote the past.

■ Introduction

Having graduated as a primary teacher in 1962, I have, in the ensuing decades, gone on to gain the experience and the qualifications to become what might best be termed a multi-sectoral, multi-skilled educational practitioner in both mainstream and Indigenous education settings. It is from within this professional context, that I have acquired a sound understanding of the importance of Indigenous studies programs, not only in the schooling sectors but also in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education sectors. In addition, having worked in the university sector since 1996, in a diversity of roles including lecturer, researcher and manager, I have a very deep insight into the value of Indigenous studies programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Add to this my personal experience as a distance education student, undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, over more than 25 years, and I would suggest I may be well qualified to discuss the role of Indigenous studies programs, as tools of empowerment in Indigenous education. In this paper, I will consider the issue within the context of the theme, “Indigenous studies, Indigenous knowledge: Dialogue or conflict in the academy”.

In choosing to write about the need to implement Indigenous studies as a tool of empowerment within the academe, in the first person, I have acknowledged I will be drawing on my own work, research and life

outcomes. I have made this decision as it was through my own lived experiences that I was able to ask colleagues and students the questions that enabled all of us to better understand not only the learning experience but also the way in which we dealt with it, and what we perceived we gained from it (Herbert, 2003, p. 84). This approach also allowed me to focus on the “dialectical art of writing” that Geelan and Taylor (2001, p. 5) claim evoked van Manen’s argument that writing [up] needs to be central to the process. They clarify this claim by citing van Manen’s 1990 work:

Writing separates us from what we know and yet unites us more closely with what we know ... distances us from the lifeworld, yet it also draws us more closely to the lifeworld ... decontextualises thought from practice and yet returns thought to praxis (or thoughtful action) (Geelan & Taylor, 2001, p. 5).

Furthermore, I perceived such an approach would allow a space for me, as an Aboriginal educator, to make my own choices about the knowledge I wished to share, a critical element in the decolonisation process that Smith argues “engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (2001, p. 20). In particular, through my own engagement with Indigenous students, I consider implementation of Indigenous studies in the academe vital, for it enables Indigenous students to engage in an empowering participatory research process. Operating within an Indigenous knowledges dimension enables students to critique the learning content and experiences throughout their courses, to identify and address their own issues, and use such knowledge and understanding as the platform for their personal, positive “growth”. This seemed to align with Smith’s assertion that:

Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples (Smith, 2001, p. 116).

In other words, higher education becomes a tool of empowerment. Enabling people to reflect upon their lived experience, which Indigenous studies can do for Indigenous students, is an important element in the process of decolonisation for it enables “constant shifts” (Feld, 1996, p. 93) in the way in which respondents interpret their memories of particular events or situations. Thus, as respondents engage with learning that is meaningful to them they are better able to utilise the memories of their lived

experiences and how they impacted upon them, to increase their capacity for transferring their learning to other situations or meanings. This is a critical process for it allows students to feel “a part” of a dynamic decolonisation process that enables them to engage in their own transformation (Smith, 2001, pp. 116-7), their own empowerment.

I am very aware that it is through my own lived experience that I have recognised and come to accept that, increasingly, this is the emerging reality for many Indigenous Australian students. In fact, I would argue that my PhD study provided ample evidence that this is a basic truth that needs to be accepted if universities are going to enable Indigenous Australians to achieve successful academic outcomes. This argument is not meant to detract from the value of Western knowledge that has, until recent times, been the central focus of our academies of higher learning. Rather, my intent is to demonstrate the validity of Indigenous Australian knowledges so that the learning space within our universities, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, might be shared. Providing a shared rather than contested space while allowing all students to gain deeper understandings of the Indigenous Australian knowledges and epistemologies would enable our First Nations students to engage in the academe in ways that not only allow them to empower themselves, but, ultimately, to become effective change agents within both their own and the wider Australian community.

■ The historical context

It is important, when considering any issues associated with Indigenous Australian participation in higher education programs, to remember that we have come but lately to the academe, that bastion of Western knowledge, where we have not been made to feel especially welcome. Our journey, especially for those who have suffered previous educational disadvantage, has been fraught with difficulty, hence, as an educator, I have found it particularly useful to consider issues within an historical context. In preparing this argument about the need for shared space, for Indigenous and Western knowledges to co-exist within the academe, I have drawn directly on sections of my own PhD thesis to provide an historical framework (Herbert, 2003, pp. 43-55) that contextualises the way in which Australia’s First Nations peoples have been positioned within the university. This approach will serve to identify the reasons that underpin my contention that Indigenous studies can be an important tool of self-empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Let me begin by pointing out that after almost two centuries of neglect and exclusion, Aborigines, during the 1950s and 1960s, began to mobilise in a deliberate move to effect change for, as Bennett indicates, at the time of the 1967 referendum “[t]here was ... a rather unfocused approach to Aboriginal Policy”

(Bennett, 1999, p. 60; House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, pp. 46-7, 59) with many States simply refusing to listen to their Aboriginal populations. No doubt this lack of interest on the part of governments has contributed to the way in which Indigenous Australians have been positioned in contemporary Australian society and its education institutions. Over time, various Aboriginal organisations were established with the aim of getting a better deal for Aborigines throughout the country but it was the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) that “linked the State ‘Advancement’ organisations and gave them additional political thrust” (Lippmann, 1994, p. 30). Due to their strong lobbying:

A referendum was held in May 1967 to change two clauses in the Federal Constitution discriminating against Aborigines: section 127, which excluded Aborigines of the full descent from national census counts and section 51 (XXVI), which prohibited the Federal government from passing laws relating to Aborigines living in the Australian States (Lippmann, 1994, p. 30).

It is important that we realise that, by the time the Commonwealth Government acquired the power to intervene, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were suffering a high degree of oppression. Bennett states:

It is possible to detect a change in this relationship which began with the entry of the Commonwealth government into this policy-making field as a consequence of the 1967 amendment of the Constitution. Aborigines gradually found an increasing number of access points to government opening for them, where their views began (if slowly at first) to be heard (1999, p. 40).

It is critical, however, that we appreciate the difference between views being “heard” and those views being heeded. Coombs suggested that through the referendum the “Aboriginal population had been co-opted into the Australian nation!” (Coombs, 1994, p. 70) and the Commonwealth Government was forced to assume a new role in terms of taking on responsibility to ensure the rights of Indigenous Australians. Significantly, this action opened Australia to international scrutiny (Lippmann, 1994, p. 31), particularly once amendments to the Constitution following the referendum “brought legal de-colonisation” (Rowley, 1986, p. 119). According to Brock:

... the 1960s saw a dramatic change in the legal status of Aborigines and in governmental

involvement and financial commitment to Aboriginal affairs, both at the State and Federal level ... many Aboriginal people moved away from segregated communities and into towns and cities, where they could now obtain housing and education for their children (1993, p. 17).

As the decade of the 1960s drew to a close, it seemed that in education nothing was working. Having been a young primary teacher at that time, I certainly remember the era of what we called “blaming the victim”. Many educators, encouraged by educational psychologists (McConnochie, 1982, p. 27), gratefully clutched at the apparent hope offered by the deficit models of education and the subsequent compensatory programs that had been developed in the United States of America. Cultural deprivation, poor health and/or hygiene, low self-esteem, no English, were all excuses that circumvented any notion that “the racist nature of society was to blame” and so “attention could be turned away from discrimination and structured inequality as the real cause of educational disadvantage” and “white society and its schools rendered themselves blameless” (Lippmann, 1994, p. 138).

But from my view, one of the most damning outcomes of our education history is the virtual impossibility of providing the evidence, the written record, of what was done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the name of education (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, pp. 31-2). In hindsight, much of what was done has been attributed to the colonial attitudes that have pervaded this country throughout its white history. Interestingly, Healy revealed a different reality, arguing that in the early years of colonisation Aboriginal peoples had a strong presence in the historical accounts provided by those living at the frontiers. Critical reading of the literature reveals the way in which Aboriginal peoples became marginalised, “subjected to and subjects of ‘the great Australian silence’” (Healy, 1997, pp. 44-5). This happened to such an extent that a leading anthropologist, W. E. H. Stanner, in delivering his 1968 Boyer lecture on the ABC, took historians to task for their part in writing:

A view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale (1968, p. 25).

Interestingly, Reynolds takes up the theme in the introduction to his book *Dispossession*, suggesting that as long as there was some glory to be gained in writing home – to Britain – providing “the vicarious thrill of contact with ‘wild’ landscapes, ‘primitive’

people and 'savage' customs" (Reynolds, 1989, p. xii), there was considerable evidence of Aborigines in the Australian landscape. By the late nineteenth century, however, efforts were being made to maintain the myth that Australia had been settled peacefully and the colonists moved on to writing home about their own exploits in conquering the land. Such action supported popular opinion that the "Aborigines were a dying race, condemned to extinction by the iron laws of evolution" (Reynolds, 1989, p. xii), hence, could be eased out of the history (McGrath, 1995, pp. 364-5). The "cult of forgetfulness" was now in play. If we think about that we begin to appreciate the realities or our history. As our First Nations peoples disappeared from the written history, along with any accounts of what was done, or being done, to them, the practice of denial could now be practised on a national scale.

Reference to the literature reveals the story of how this happened. McGrath (1995) argued that the blurring of disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology contributed to the neglect, while Mulvaney suggests that the early written records about Aborigines consisted mainly of narratives written by those who observed them, hence their accounts reflected the attitudes people had developed toward Aborigines as a result of "the nature of colonial society ... penal colonies with Europeans divided into gaolers and gaoled, a condition hardly conducive to the elevation of the dignity of any man" (Mulvaney, 1990a, p. 13). The "domination of the British structural-functional school of anthropology in Australia led to an emphasis on reconstructing past cultures, with its static cultural model deflecting attention altogether from processes of change" (McGrath, 1995, p. 366) and the practice of anthropologists such as A. P. Elkin who "attempted to nurture cosy research relationships with government policy makers and the pastoralists upon whose land many Aborigines resided. To these men, such charged issues as colonialism and indigenous exploitation were anathema" (1995, p. 366).

Similarly, Finlayson cites Cowlshaw's argument that "anthropologists unwittingly contributed to the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people as natural, primitive and authentic by accepting employment with State and Territory Governments as experts in Aboriginal culture" (1995, p. 10). The evidence exists in the education departments' archival records for the various states and territories. Yet, critically, the dominant culture remained ignorant of the reality of Aboriginal lives and the place to which they had been relegated within Australian society for the "anthropological establishment reinforced the notion that Aborigines, whilst having a static 'past' to uncover and preserve, did not have a history" (McGrath, 1995, p. 367) and, in the longer term, "they failed to argue for the human rights of Aboriginal people to self-determination" (Finlayson, 1995, p. 11) The contribution of the discipline was further tainted

with the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, a research centre that opened in Canberra in 1963-64. A facility devoted to retrieving the past, where:

Anthropologists, linguists and experts in material culture dominated the establishment ... [and] [w]hen historians' interest in "Aboriginal history" strengthened, they were viewed as untrained and unsuitable for research on Aborigines ... due to lack of anthropological training (McGrath, 1995, p. 367).

Significantly, Mulvaney argued that it was this "separation of the past into two sections, reclassified as separate disciplines", that resulted in the neglect of Aboriginal history for as the proponents of the emerging prehistory "posed a challenging new version of history, they were edged out of their parent discipline" – history – (1990b, p. 156) and, as the focus shifted to prehistory, Aborigines, as individuals who lived personal lives, were increasingly unlikely to appear.

Unfortunately, the reality of the Aborigines' increasing invisibility may also have been simply a reflection of current government policies that, according to Haebich, were "influenced by shifts in attitudes and practice abroad" (2000, p. 144). The increasing use of legislative control and institutionalisation to achieve social control, mirrored models used in Britain and, subsequently, the United States and Canada to deal with their "problem populations" (Haebich, 2000, p. 145) by incarcerating them in institutions where they were effectively out of public sight. As the historical record increasingly reveals, by the mid-nineteenth century, education for many Aboriginal children throughout Australia, particularly those labelled "half-caste", appears to have become a process that isolated them from their families and marginalised them from the wider society (Haebich, 2000, pp. 149-150). The practice of institutionalisation flourished in Australia because there was no intention of preparing Aborigines for citizenship.

Assimilation merged into the policy of integration in the late 1960s although, as McConnochie (1982) reveals, there was no real change of policy because Indigenous peoples were still expected to change themselves to become more acceptable to white society. McConnochie argues that, to this point, "assimilationist goals ... excluded any consideration of the social implications of schooling in pluralistic societies", pointing out that "[h]istorians have been widely criticized for writing Aborigines out of Australian history. If this is true of general histories of Australia, it is even more true of histories of Australian education" (McConnochie, 1982, p. 28).

During the 1950s and 1960s, due to the civil rights movement in the United States of America,

there was a growing awareness of Aboriginal rights as demonstrated by the Charles Perkins' inspired "Freedom Rides" in New South Wales in 1965. Such awareness culminated in the overwhelming "yes" vote given by the Australian public in the 1967 referendum. Whitlam and Cohen had argued strongly for a rights-based system of education throughout the 1960s and the policy of the Schools Commission, adopted in 1969 and refined in 1971, stated:

Everyone has the right to education. It is the obligation of the Commonwealth and the States in cooperation to provide and operate educational services, which shall be available to all without charge (Dudley & Vidovich, 1995, p. 60).

While the Schools Commission Policy was designed to address the needs of the schooling sector, including technical education, their stance on the achievement of equitable outcomes was of particular value to Indigenous education. In arguing the importance of resourcing programs designed to address educational disadvantage, the Commission stated "Aboriginal people are such a group for whom different educational strategies and approaches are required" (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 21).

Haebich, in asserting that under "Whitlam the nation moved away from the policies of White Australia and Aboriginal assimilation and the foundations of a multicultural nation were forged" (2000, p. 572), reveals a shift that held considerable hope for the future of Indigenous educational achievement. The new Labor Government had such enthusiasm for reform that the changes in Aboriginal Affairs inferred in the 1967 referendum were accelerated to the extent that, "[b]y the early 1970s, functions such as education and housing had been transferred to relevant government departments" (2000, p. 485). Social policy reflected the government's replacement of "assimilation with self-determination as the primary emphasis in Aboriginal affairs" (Finlayson, 1995, p. 7). According to Mickler, the "policy of self-determination adopted by the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 presumed a destination of distinct peoplehood for Aborigines, if not quasi-nation status" (1998, p. 203). The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), staffed with "key Aboriginal appointments" and designed to provide "an innovative federal definition of Aboriginality" and with "imperatives to consult with Aboriginal communities in all matters" (Haebich, 2000, p. 572), was set up in 1972. "Unprecedented levels of funding (with significant flow-ons to the states) were allocated to bring Aboriginal housing, education, welfare, health, employment and legal aid in line with community standards" (Haebich, 2000, p. 572).

In the early 1980s, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education gathered considerable information concerning Indigenous participation, retention and performance from various sources, including a range of Government reports; various research projects containing data that had been gathered prior to 1976; and Professor Watts' 1981 review of Aboriginal Education (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, pp. 21-24). The data provided them with a stark insight into the inadequacies of the Australian education systems in providing meaningful education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Hence, the Select Committee, reporting in 1985, concluded that, despite the improvements of the past decade, Aboriginal educational outcomes continued to be significantly lower than those of the non-Indigenous community across all sectors of education. The Committee found that, while the Aboriginal voice had been created in the form of the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), "lack of co-ordination in the policy development and funding of Aboriginal education" (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 2) had led to confusion and waste.

In the interests of Indigenous self-determination in education, the committee made a number of recommendations designed to strengthen the NAEC and the State and Territory Consultative Groups, as it was argued that due to the "tremendous diversity of Aboriginal society, it is at the local level that Aboriginal self-determination can be most significant" (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 4). In summing up their concerns regarding Indigenous self-determination in education, the Select Committee stated that their overall strategy was meant to ensure the "Aboriginalisation of the process of education for Aboriginal people. It is only when this process is complete that one will be able to talk in a meaningful sense of Aboriginal self-determination in education" (1985, p. 5). In his concluding statement, the Committee Chair, Allen Blanchard, MP, discussed the issues surrounding the question "education for what?" highlighting the complexities inherent in the question and ending with the statement, "[t]he Committee is asking that educational authorities listen to what Aboriginal people are saying they want from education and respond to the needs expressed" (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 203).

Amongst the many changes that occurred during the decade of the 1970s was the establishment of consultative bodies in Aboriginal education. In 1977, the NAEC was established as an advisory body to the Commonwealth Minister for Education to replace the Aboriginal Consultative Group (Sherwood, 1982, p. 36). The all-Indigenous Committee drew representation from all States and members were

selected for their experience in formal education or for their value as community representatives. They accepted the definition that:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he lives (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 228).

This was an important step in addressing the failure of the educational system to cater for the needs of Aboriginal students for it indicated an acknowledgement that non-Indigenous people were not necessarily the best people to speak about Indigenous educational needs and that it was critical to involve Indigenous people in educational decision-making at the highest levels (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 35). In highlighting the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their needs, the NAEC also supported the stance of the former Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission of 1975, that Aboriginal people want education that will enable them to operate successfully in both their own culture and the wider Australian society (1985, p. 36).

The 1980s marked a real change in the public profile of Indigenous Australians. The 1985 Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, commonly known as the Miller Report, placed the issue of tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples firmly on the public social policy agenda through an examination of the reasons why the Aboriginal unemployment rate in 1981 was 25% compared with a national rate, at that time, of under 6% (1985, p. 24). The statistical evidence was vital in enabling Miller's Committee to profile issues relating to the underlying causes of Aboriginal unemployment and joblessness, while also demonstrating the deplorable state of secondary and tertiary education for Indigenous Australians less than thirty years ago. Such statistics also serve to reinforce arguments pertaining to the way in which societal attitudes contributed to the positioning of Indigenous Australians in Australian society. This was a period of considerable interest out in the schools and other educational institutions where we finally began to feel that we were getting somewhere. Our leaders were extremely able and articulate in revealing the realities of what had not been done in the name of education and it seemed that governments were finally beginning to listen. We dared to hope.

But, despite the findings of the Miller report and the subsequent Aboriginal Education Task Force (1988), followed by the implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy

on 1 January 1990, it would appear that, in reality, little has changed. Across all sectors of community service, providers are now responding to the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) "Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage" strategy. Significantly, it has been stated that on all measures, Indigenous Australians lag behind other Australians in their educational attainment. With such depressing outcomes continually being trumpeted out into the wider community via the media, there are definitely times when it would appear that our educational systems remain locked into the old deficit thinking.

COAG (2009) has adopted an Indigenous Education Statement titled "Towards the Development of an Indigenous Education Action Plan", and all universities were recently required to submit written responses to the proposal that had been widely circulated. It is intended that the national Indigenous Education Action Plan will include a commitment that States and Territories will implement specific strategies to meet the COAG Indigenous education targets in areas of concentrated Indigenous population. This is a particularly interesting development given that, in 1999, the then Minister for Education, David Kemp, indicated that high Indigenous unemployment was due to their high level of educational disadvantage. Kemp also added, however, that, even when Indigenous people did achieve similar educational qualifications to their non-Indigenous counterparts, they continued to experience higher unemployment rates, the reason for which "I believe is largely due to racism" (Kemp, 1999, p. 12). While Kemp's failure to implement strategies that would address this issue were widely seen as a reflection of the Howard Government's unwillingness to acknowledge racism as a critical issue in Australian society, the Rudd Government appeared equally ineffectual as evidenced by the Prime Minister's responses to the recent spate of violent incidents directed toward Indian students in Melbourne. It would appear that, despite the rhetoric concerning "Closing the Gap" and the supposed Education Revolution, current Australian governments, at all levels, are continuing to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo as it has developed through Australia's settler history. It is obvious that Indigenous Australians will need to continue their struggle to overcome racist attitudes and re-position themselves as equal knowledge partners within the academe. Indigenous studies is a key element in achieving this.

■ Defining Indigenous studies

While it is difficult to find a definition for Indigenous studies, in the Australian context, within the higher education sector, the following could be used as an overarching guide:

Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies are studies for all students about Aboriginal societies and Torres Strait Islander societies (Curriculum Corporation, 1995, p. 1).

So what do I mean when I refer to Indigenous studies within the context of this paper? Let me answer that with another question. What is meant when we, as Indigenous Australians, refer to “Western knowledge”? While I would suggest that we may not know exactly what is meant, our understanding of the concept is likely to be directly influenced by who we are and where we, individually and collectively, have come from. Within that context, it seems to me unlikely that we would have a meaningful definition of “Western knowledge”, rather it is more likely we would perceive of it as a construct of power that was created by the colonisers. It provided the means for the destruction of our cultures, languages and knowledges and was intended to make us, over time, the perpetrators of our own destruction. Yet, based on my own research, I would argue that we are beginning to build the capacity to halt that destruction and that education, in particular, higher education, has begun to emerge as a critical tool of empowerment for Indigenous Australians. The key to education as a tool of empowerment for Indigenous Australians is, in my opinion, Indigenous studies.

So let's go back to the question of “what is Indigenous studies”? In reflecting upon the emerging body of scholarly work that is being produced by Indigenous scholars such as Karen Martin, Lester Irabinna Rigney, Felecia Watkin-Lui, Martin Nakata, along with the exciting and innovative research that is being undertaken by a growing number of Indigenous people undertaking postgraduate studies, I would argue that we must resist locking Indigenous studies into a narrow disciplinary framework. Rather, it seems to me that it is more to do with those things that make us Indigenous Australians – the values and beliefs that determine the way we think, our behaviours and the way we live – the broad spectrum of Indigenous knowledges. Essentially, based on my own experience as an educator and researcher, I would argue that Indigenous studies uses a framework of Indigenous knowledges to reveal realities about our way of seeing the world, thus influencing and enhancing our capacity for learning – how we learn, what we learn and so on.

So regardless of the discipline we choose to study – education, health, science, law – we will interpret the information we receive through our own frames of reference, our Indigenous perspectives. Hence, I would contend that Indigenous studies, in enabling people to learn about Indigenous cultures, peoples, arts, communications, law, can be argued to be the interdisciplinary conduit through which we equip ourselves to validate Indigenous knowledges within the academe. I do not wish to imply that Indigenous

studies is for Indigenous Australians only. In fact, I wish to suggest the opposite for I believe that, in its unique focus on the diverse aspects of Indigeneity, Indigenous studies has the capacity to prepare all Australians for more effective engagement with one another, a reality that can only lead to a more democratic society one that is truly egalitarian rather than one that gives lip service to the notion of individual freedom while denying the First Nations of this land their right to freedom as the first peoples – freedom to speak out against the injustices they endure in their everyday lives, freedom to reclaim their language and their cultures, freedom to make their own choices around where and how they want to live.

■ Presenting the evidence

In this next section, I will use specific findings from my own PhD research (Herbert, 2003, pp. 249-262) to provide evidence to support the argument that Indigenous studies is a tool of empowerment within Indigenous higher education. In this way, I will give voice to Indigenous students who, in my opinion, constitute the most critical community we serve, as Indigenous educators.

Significantly, my research demonstrated that more recent education and equity policies have, to date, had a limited affect in altering the status quo of Indigenous Australians within Australian society. This fact is evidenced by the financial situation of the majority of our students. Suffice to say that the on-going failure of government policies to redress the continuing impoverishment of Indigenous Australians is a critical concern and implies the urgent need for governments to accept responsibility for the delivery of education services that prepare all citizens for the new world order by focusing on “diversity as a core cultural competence” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 12) while also putting an end to racial oppression (hooks, 1990).

More importantly, within the context of this paper, the evidence gathered clearly indicated that for education to become a useful transformational process for Indigenous Australians, universities must accept responsibility for ensuring all students acquire graduate attributes that will ultimately lead to more effective cross-cultural engagement within the wider society. These findings provide a critical premise upon which to argue a mandatory requirement for all Australian university courses to contain specific Indigenous studies course content.

Significantly, I found that racism is the major cause of Indigenous students feeling devalued and excluded within the university learning environment and the evidence highlighted the perception that this situation persists because universities favour Western cultural traditions that ensure the maintenance of colonial cultural hegemonies. A critical revelation of the data was that many Indigenous students lack self-esteem

and a sense of their worth as an Indigenous Australian, particularly during their first year in mainstream programs, hence, cross-cultural awareness and training programs delivered by qualified Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff are a key strategy in universities striving to provide inclusive learning environments for students from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Interestingly, the data gathering process revealed that all of the students I interviewed had discovered that their engagement in higher education learning environments that were inclusive of Indigenous perspectives had been a particularly empowering process for them. Their capacity to engage with the knowledge had given them a voice, a critical element in terms of enabling them, as individuals, to develop their capacity for academic achievement.

Furthermore, the evidence clearly indicated that Indigenous students want universities to acknowledge the validity of Indigenous Australian knowledges, values and beliefs by making them a part of university course offerings, for they perceive that, in order to achieve self-determination, to use education as a tool of empowerment, they need an education that demonstrates a respect for Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and epistemologies. The evidence indicated that students believe universities have a responsibility to society to provide leadership in the creation of a fairer and more harmonious society and it was argued that this could only be achieved through enhancing cross-cultural understanding across all discipline areas of the university. Within this context, respondents argued that an Indigenous studies program, consisting of a minimum of one subject per year, should be mandatory for all graduates of Australian universities. In conclusion, I would argue that the implementation of this strategy would certainly enable all students to engage in a meaningful dialogue, a dialogue that would then permeate into the wider society and achieve the essential changes that Indigenous educators across all sectors of education have advocated so passionately for so long.

■ Conclusion

Finally, Indigenous scholarship has gained a foothold in the academe and Indigenous scholars are stating their case unequivocally and demanding recognition for the legitimacy of their learning journeys – for the importance of their knowledges and epistemologies. Significantly, there is a sense that they have no time to waste for they have already been too long denied their rightful place in the academe. The evidence demonstrated that the students in this study who achieved success within the context of their university studies have discovered that they do not have to give up one, namely their identity as Indigenous Australians, to be a part of the other, to be recognised as scholars within the academe.

But they will need persistence and, as my study showed they would persist until they achieve the changes they desire (Herbert, 2003, p. 262). This is a critical point given Healy's concerns regarding the fact that "forgetting Aborigines" is not something that belongs only in the past, rather it "has occurred in television and art" (2008, p. 101) and the "crisis is legible in the government booklet *Becoming an Australian Citizen*" (2008, p. 102) which he argues "captures perfectly the spectre of Aboriginality haunting Australian heritage" (2008, p. 103). Healy argues that we need to move on from the pluralist mentality of our society, suggesting that what he terms "vernacular memory" based as it is on particular and lived experiences, might well provide the means of "trafficking between past and present" (2008, p. 105).

It is somewhat ironical that, in promoting the benefits of globalisation and in their commitment to policies of economic rationalism, Australian governments will, ultimately, assist Indigenous Australians to achieve their goal of equality within the university. My research has shown that, in the evolution of higher education in this country, governments have increased their influence within the university and assumed greater control of the way in which universities operate. This has forced universities to open their doors to cohorts of students, including Indigenous students, who, in the past, would not have been able to access university. Within this context the very notion of what the traditional university stood for has already been challenged and forced to change. And, having now established their place in the university, Indigenous Australians will persist in challenging the university to accommodate their goals, to build a different pathway into the future for all Australians for that is the destination that the students in my research articulated as the ultimate goal of their journey into higher education.

Clearly, it is time for the voices of the First Peoples of this nation to be heard and heeded. Implementing Indigenous studies programs in undergraduate and postgraduate programs is, I would argue, the critical conduit for enabling those voices to be heard and for enabling Indigenous Australians to use education as the tool of empowerment it has long promised to be. It is time for the academe to make the dream come true, to address diversity through the use of a collaborative approach that will encourage and enhance dialogue rather than conflict.

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