

***For the development of transformative pedagogies through 'courageous conversations' within the cultural interface to motivate student engagement and promote reconciliation.***

**OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT**

James Cook University (JCU) is committed to achieving "genuine and sustainable reconciliation between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community (University Plan)." This nomination powerfully highlights our achievements since 2007 to enact transformative pedagogies that are innovative and importantly, valued by a diverse student cohort, JCU and the wider community of North Queensland. The subject we have designed and teach, *Linking Indigeness* – a first year subject, is highly sought after by international students, established now as a foundation subject for Bachelor of Education students, and taken as an elective by a wide array of students ranging across our University areas.

**The pedagogy we have adopted places students at the heart of the experience, embracing challenging issues of race relations, but in supportive, inspiring and motivating ways.** To positively influence student learning, improve student engagement, and create a meaningful student experience over the past four years, we developed a rich repertoire of experiences. Our pedagogies not only reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies, but also draw upon the worldviews of our diverse student cohort. Interactive delivery, jointly facilitated by two of us, Sharon Moore, an Indigenous lecturer, and Lynette Ireland, a non-Indigenous lecturer, aims to engage innovative approaches to reach the broader mix of students and to model a culturally safe space for interactions. We intentionally determined that a different philosophy, pedagogy and practice were required to develop an effective program that could enact a real difference to student perceptions, inclusive of 'hearing' and 'valuing' students' individual voices. The result is a highly effective teaching model where students can see how two cultures can work strategically and respectfully together. The outcome is the articulation and implementation of the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2004).

**The overarching pedagogy utilised is that of transformation.**

Our curriculum places the individual students into a critically self-reflective mode of thinking. Our subject aims to ensure 'engaging' is a core element and that all students feel an integral part of the cultural landscape. We successfully engage the students through a blend of sheer passion and intentionally 'create spaces and make places' for our students to examine emotionally difficult topics relating to culture, colonialism, the politics of representation and our identities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Enthusiasm for this subject is infectious as we create a 'cutting edge' learning space that seeks to actively engage students in 'courageous conversations' (Singleton, Linton and Singleton, 2005), where open and honest dialogue can occur. We deliberately employ the term 'cutting edge' because this subject is about cutting across boundaries, dissecting complex conversations, breaking down the binaries of black/white or them/us and deconstructing how we make sense of our connections with each other.

Our **transformative pedagogy** then, focuses on three (3) key approaches:

1. Experiential or encounter learning with cultural guides.
2. Modeling and facilitating 'courageous conversations' at the cultural interface.
3. Narrative inquiry including personal multilayered and multi-media learning experiences.

The overwhelming feedback on our approach indicates that we are on the right track, taking our students with us into the challenging, yet inspiring space that comprises the 'cultural interface'.

**How do we 'create space and make the place' for transformative learning to occur?** In our team teaching approach, we model 'courageous conversations' through sharing our own cultural experiences to demonstrate how to reflect and interrogate our own positions and that of others. For example, we explore the ways in which hegemonic stereotypes are perpetuated and invite students to critically engage in conversations based on the varied perspectives of past and present events. We challenge these stereotypes by focusing on the emotive stories of individuals, not to judge, but rather to see people as products of their time, so that our students can connect to them as human beings rather than as cultural

*I thoroughly enjoyed this subject and the way in which it was delivered. The teaching staff created a safe environment for discussion of important issues; issues which were handled in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner. I think this subject should be a compulsory subject for all students at JCU as it is delivered and taught in a manner that serves to enhance individual awareness of Indigenous issues (Student evaluation, 2011).*

*Sharon really captured my attention and I learnt more about Indigenous people and their culture/history in this subject. I really enjoyed her facts and how approachable she was. I was not afraid to ask personal questions. Overall, Sharon should be feeling awesome about student outcomes and knowing that I left with a greater understanding and respect for Indigenous people (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*If this subject were to continue for higher levels or later year students, I would be willing to take the subject again (Student evaluation 2010).*

representations. In doing so, we utilise a strong scaffold whereby the students can gradually and confidently offer their opinions in a safe environment knowing that these will be heard and valued. Our pedagogy is inclusive of:

- a collaborative teaching approach, modelling how to overcome the challenges of emotionally difficult topics;
- a strong and visible positioning of Indigenous voices as primary sources of stories;
- the creation of spaces as opportunities to build relationships, fostering synergy between students, Elders & Indigenous scholars;
- the development of 'mirrored' spaces that allow students to 'look back' upon themselves and the structure of their worldview leading to a refreshed standpoint; and
- a collaborative deconstruction of texts to demonstrate how individuals take up different values and positions.

#### CRITERION 1: APPROACHES TO THE SUPPORT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING THAT INFLUENCE, MOTIVATE AND INSPIRE STUDENTS TO LEARN

*Linking Indigenousness* encapsulates passion as praxis. Our belief is that if students can connect with the subject matter, via the human element of our offered stories, then they are more likely to willingly traverse difficult topics imbued with elements of racism. As such, we have to deepen the dialogue *with* them not *to* them. Therefore, the pedagogies we adopt are intentionally inclusive and respectful of all. In this manner, we encourage our students to become active agents of change, fostering possibilities for cultural transformations to occur.

##### (1) Experiential or encounter learning with cultural guides

Experiential learning allows students to reframe their understandings of the world following a direct experience. In both Townsville and Cairns, students participate in field trips accompanied by us, but led by cultural guides. For example, 'Uncle Rusty' Butler, a local Aboriginal elder, leads the field trips in Townsville while the Tjapukai (from Cairns) and Kuku Yalanji (from Mossman) guide the Cairns students. These interpretive guides epitomise the heart of our success. Their honest and caring interactions allow all of our students to approach, value and engage in positive and respectful cultural exchanges, enabling them to talk openly about sensitive issues. The significance of our cultural guides, as interpreters, cannot be understated. Their inclusion breathes life into the cultural content of our subject, revealing a side of life which cannot be gleaned from texts. Importantly, through our respectful and ongoing partnerships and strong connections to the local Indigenous community, we model for the students the need to engage with different worldviews. This then becomes a 'mirrored' space as these practical encounters require them to examine their own place within these cultural interactions. These experiences are the basis for reflections, dialogues and assessment tasks and, coupled with the campus-based experience, create a lasting impact. This then supports the initial transformation in students' understanding of Indigenous Australians as the quotes in the text box indicate.

*The trips to the Townsville Cultural Centre, Salt Flats and Turtle Rock were the highlights of my semester! (Student evaluation, 2008).*

*It was great to go on the field trip with "Uncle Rusty" and see how Indigenous people live off the land and see nature in a different light. I really like hearing about the history from someone who was talking from experience. I learnt a lot of things I did not know; this knowledge was gained in the lectures, the field trip and from the visit to the cultural centre. The lecturers were great. Totally approachable. I really did love this subject and have been recommending it to my friends. It was not a core subject for me – I chose to do it and am so glad I did. When I finish my diploma and start my degree next year I will consider taking another Indigenous subject (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*I loved interacting with Uncle Rusty on the fieldtrip. He is truly a deep and thought provoking man (Unsolicited student feedback via email, 1 May 2011).*

##### (2) Modeling and facilitating courageous conversations at the cultural interface

Our teaching is fundamentally informed, by Nakata's (2004) notion of the 'cultural interface'. The interface is a theoretical space and is open to tension and negotiation, but also to potentials and possibilities. *Linking Indigenousness* provides the space whereby the authenticity of these interface interactions are realised, and a space for meaningful dialogue across cultural divides is possible:

*What is needed is a reconsideration of a different conceptualisation of the cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings of a knowledge system...(and) should be primarily about bringing them into conversation with knowledge in the traditional disciplines in order to negotiate a new set of meanings and reinterpretation of meanings (Nakata 2004, p. 14).*

Like Nakata, we attempt to 'story' our experience to provide a springboard for the difficult dialogues we are having in contemporary Australia, at the interface of Indigenous and western knowledge systems. We make the appeal for more productive engagement in the difficult debates that are essential to reconciliation, for example, we explore the stories and discuss the effects of dispossession and dislocation of Indigenous peoples from many communities to become the one Bwgcolman community on Palm Island. These stories, often silenced and misunderstood, take courage to speak about. We encourage students by indicating that 'no topic is taboo'. The underlying philosophy of these conversations is 'courage is the force that creates history'. This idea of courage promotes supportive risk-taking, creating the possibility for cultural connectivity and the potential for reconciliation, as the following student evaluations indicate:

*I feel this subject should be compulsory for all students regardless of what they are studying. I am more aware of what happened in the past and why reconciliation is so important today and for the future and I feel that this new knowledge will help me to become a better teacher. Thank you (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*Thanks again for making us all feel so comfortable in class as learners, even us non-Australians with little pre-existing knowledge (Unsolicited international student email, 2012).*

*Lyn & Sharon both made the subject interesting without bias (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*This subject has made me realize (that) the cultural differences are (sic) the best aspect (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*I was personally not really looking forward to doing this subject as I thought it would be boring and mundane but it turned out to be really interesting and eye opening (Student evaluation, 2011).*

*Many thanks to you both for facilitating the two fantastic workshops in Cairns, they were very informative and you have changed and challenged many of my thoughts in relation to Indigenous Australians (Unsolicited student email, 2012).*

*Sharon's teaching methods were sensitive to what could be considered a confronting subject especially in view of the past treatment of the Indigenous population. She discussed current issues with thoughtful insight which generated discussion among student group (Student evaluation, 2007).*

*Before joining this class, I was somewhat unaware of the existence of the Cultural Interface and I shied away from engaging in cultural discussion because of how difficult they can be. This class has shown me that although existing in the Cultural Interface is difficult; it is necessary and very rewarding. I am just one person, but if everyone could have the experience I had in this class, the Cultural Interface would become a thing of sharing and beauty not tension. Because we are active agents in our own lives, we must use our learning to create cross-cultural understanding on a day-to-day basis. This is where the cultural interface and classes like this become very useful (Student evaluation, 2010).*

### (3) Narrative inquiry including multilayered and multimedia learning experiences

We energise the curriculum through the use of multi-layered stories of those involved in the events that have shaped the historical, social and cultural terrain. We draw on the idea that 'our metaphors define us and our stories sustain us' (Foeman and Nance, 2002). In other words, we examine the socially constructed terrain of past events and mindsets surrounding Indigenous histories to contest and re-present current perspectives of Indigenous Australians. Our focus points are those that prioritise Indigenous voices and give a multi-directional gaze into the diversity and depth of Indigenous Australia. This is why we draw upon a number of Indigenous media such as the film, *One Night the Moon* by Rachel Perkins and the text *Maybe Tomorrow* by Monty 'Boori' Pryor to deconstruct layers of meaning within these learning experiences. We include guest speakers that invoke their stories for further student reflection. Student engagement excels with this approach as the student evaluations' indicate.

*The different ways of presenting information was extremely beneficial. I liked how you displayed pictures, shared stories...viewed the film and other hands on activities (Student evaluation, 2007).*

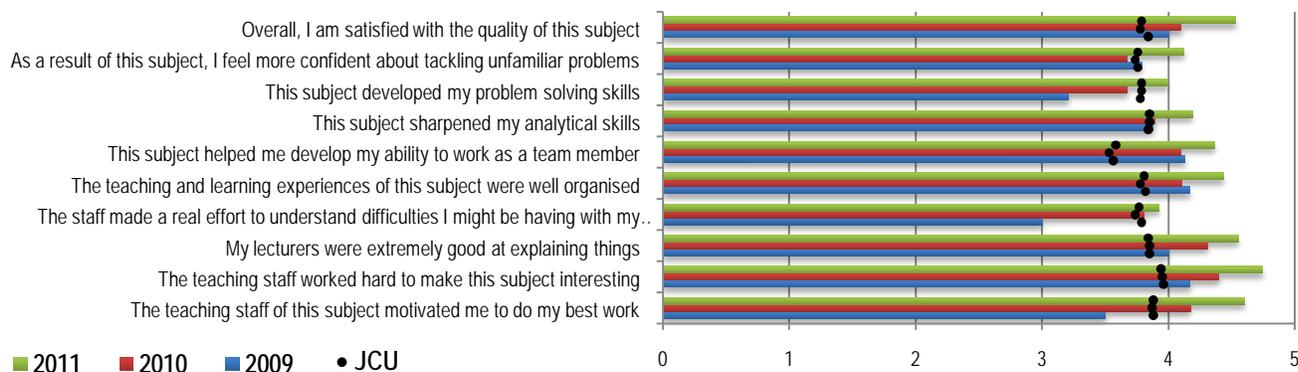
*One night the moon told the core story. Monty's book was worth the read (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*Lyn's personal engagement with the subject was apparent in her enthusiastic teaching of the subject. A wide range of literature allowed for active engagement and discussion thoughtfully provoked. Her particular strength was in playing 'devil's advocate' to open lines of exploration into areas that were otherwise taboo. Great teacher who made this subject highly enjoyable! (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*This was a phenomenal learning experience for someone from a different country. I loved learning about Indigenous Australians and their culture and views and how all Australians and even those of us from overseas have the opportunity to be part of this in a positive way (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*First of all I wanted to say thank you to you both for workshop one. I really enjoyed myself but was at the same time stretched. and challenged and enlightened (Unsolicited student email. Cairns. 2012).*

Figure 1: IA1007 SFS Results Vs JCU Average 2009-2011



### EVIDENCE OF RECOGNITION

At the institutional level, our innovative teaching approach to *Linking Indigenousness* has been recognized with both a Faculty and the overall JCU Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning (2011). Our approach has been showcased at a University-wide forum chaired by Prof Martin Nakata and shared with colleagues at the invitation of the Pro-Vice Chancellor, on **four separate occasions** for the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Science *Scholarly Teaching Fest* (2008-2011).

Beyond the University, our approach to teaching this subject is endorsed by local elders:

*Linking Indigenousness delivered by SIAS at JCU is a wonderful example of a subject which enriches the lives of students and by including the Indigenous community on this journey of sharing and healing, it transforms all those involved. The dynamic teaching team respectfully speaks to the individual heart of each student regardless of their cultural backgrounds, encouraging them to examine and consider their own positions and place within the "Cultural Interface". Such reflective practice can only add value to the professional capabilities of student graduates. Is this not real reconciliation in practice? (Florence Onus, Bindal Aboriginal Community (Townsville), Chairperson National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Ltd, 2011).*

*The Linking program fosters an environment where students from different cultures can learn from one another. The real value lies in the fact that the program enables conversations that seek to recognize and value everyone in the process of learning, and acknowledges that we do not all have the same experiences or beliefs. In this way, the lecturers are fostering in the students a willingness to learn, grow and work together (George Akee, Tarem Le Meriam (Torres Strait) Elder, 2011).*

National endorsement has also followed, with Professor Martin Nakata, Director of Nura Gili, University of New South Wales (2012), noting our transformational approach as follows:

*Curriculum and pedagogical innovations focused on contemporary aspects of Australian Indigenous studies as complex cultural interfaces is a challenging area for new scholarship in learning and teaching areas. The Linking Indigenousness Subject devised by the School of Indigenous Studies and powerfully delivered by Lyn and Sharon begins the courageous journey into this area and leads the effort nationally to fully establish new scholarship in this field. I highly commend the leadership taken in this initiative as a significant contribution to the improvement of student learning.*

### CONCLUDING STATEMENT

This citation outlines how we have successfully utilised three innovative elements of transformational pedagogy: (1) experiential learning with cultural guides; (2) modeling 'courageous conversations' in the cultural interface; and (3) narrative inquiry, to engage, motivate and inspire student learning. The challenging, contentious yet enriching space that exists in embedding Indigenous perspectives within the Australian higher education contexts, cannot be understated. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) cites the importance of this as a strategic goal at the national level. *Linking Indigenousness* stands as testimony to how this can be achieved and how reconciliation becomes more than just rhetoric. To see students who were previously culturally cautious or withdrawn take a 'leap of faith' and engage in these 'courageous conversations', denotes the ultimate act of transformation as exemplified by the following student response:

*I just want to share a story with you... Sometime before Christmas I was waiting for a taxi in the mall and was confronted by an inebriated and angry young [Aboriginal] woman. Rather than flinch from her and ignore her, I took a chance and asked her where she was from. To my surprise, she told me. This opened up a dialogue between us and we sat there for quite some time, while she told me her sad story. Although she was young, her pain was obvious. I know this doesn't sound like anything special, but I just wanted to thank you for your program. Without it, I would not have had the courage to talk to her and hear her story (Unsolicited student feedback via email 2009).*