

# **Decolonising Sociology Curriculum: Using an Online Immersive Learning Environment to Deliver Cross-cultural Training**

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## **Abstract**

The paper describes an online cultural training workshop based around the complex Aboriginal Kinship systems used in Australia.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the learning environment where the thematic focus is on relationships and interaction, and how immersive learning and narrative teaching styles work together within a social constructivist approach to deliver this outcome. Prior to discussing how both a social constructivist immersive learning environment achieves such outcomes, the paper will describe the online workshop design in the context of decolonizing mainstream pedagogies.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal knowledge, Teaching sociology, Indigenous issues, decolonising curriculum, immersive learning environments

## **Introduction**

The paper describes a social constructivist immersive teaching project aimed at delivering online cross-cultural training at the university level based on an existing workshop designed and presented to non-Aboriginal staff and students by Lynette Riley. This paper reflects on the pedagogical framework and adopted social constructivist immersive learning environment, and in doing so describes how the project adopts what is referred to in the higher education literature as a social constructivist problem-based immersive learning approach that combines complementary approaches to teaching including:

problem-based experiential learning; an immersive teaching style; a narrative teaching style; and a social constructivist approach. These principles underpin the designing of a program that embeds diverse Aboriginal knowledges in mainstream humanities and social science subjects including sociology subjects, at the University of Sydney, through web services.<sup>1 2</sup>

### **Decolonising pedagogy**

The online Cross Cultural Training workshop is being designed as an experiential learning environment for two reasons. Firstly, there is a long denial of Aboriginal knowledges and their importance in contemporary Aboriginal culture in Australia. Secondly, the experiential format is used in Aboriginal learning and is therefore an appropriate way of conveying these knowledge systems. Much of this knowledge requires many years for Aboriginal children to learn, and non-Aboriginal students are coming in with the cultural bias of up to 20 years of western teaching. Furthermore, this method enables non-Aboriginal students to have a taste of the issues without cognitive overload.

The project reflects where possible the Aboriginal knowledge sharing processes, bringing this into the mainstream teaching of humanities and social science related subjects, such as sociology, law, education and social work. Aboriginal knowledge sharing has been adapted to this experiential learning environment via software design.

Aboriginal knowledge sharing processes are traditionally through interwoven stories, song and dance at a community ceremony or corroboree (Langton 1997). These dances provide for re-enactment and an environment for experiential learning of the subject matter. While web services provide a form of mediation that is representational and more static than previous methods of knowledge sharing (Verran & Christie, 2007), this medium does provide opportunities for user adaption and the generation of material. As such, the project facilitates Aboriginal knowledge sharing in an online environment. Aboriginal students, staff and communities will be telling their stories and it is these stories that are central to the online environment.

In doing so, the online cross cultural training web service will assist non-Aboriginal academics teaching indigenous content as part of mainstream curriculum to incorporate both Aboriginal Standpoint Pedagogy and Aboriginal voices into teaching. The online cross cultural training web service achieves this by incorporating and embedding Aboriginal community participation into the development of this teaching resource, ensuring that it reflects Aboriginal peoples' standpoints (Phillips & Whatman 2007).

This also has the dual purpose of decolonizing mainstream curriculum and allowing us to share Aboriginal perspectives and embed Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum of mainstream disciplines, contributing to the broader project of decolonizing Indigenous knowledges and learning in western higher education institutions. As McLaughlin and Whatman (2007: 2) note, 'highly provocative debates and insights concerning

decolonising Indigenous knowledge and learning in western institutions of higher education emerged in the last half of the century championed by Indigenous scholars and intellectuals'. Battiste (2002) argues that integrating the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people into mainstream education creates a balanced centre from which to analyse European culture and learning. These analyses support an online teaching approach that uses storytelling and interactive gaming.

This is pertinent to disciplines such as sociology. This project will enable non-Aboriginal academics to go beyond simply foregoing our 'pretence to be a [white] "academic expert"' on Aboriginal issues and minimising the risk of undervaluing local knowledge and Aboriginal culture. It will enable educators to teach in a way that respects and allows Aboriginal voices to be highlighted in our lectures and our tutorials (Healy-Ingram 2011: 70). The inclusion of Aboriginal peoples' first-hand accounts of Aboriginal knowledge in sociology curricula will also reinforce the decentering of the white non-Aboriginal sociologist as an expert on 'Aboriginality' via the incorporation of Aboriginal Standpoint Pedagogy into our teaching. It will enable educators to provide non-Aboriginal students with a richer and deeper understanding of the issues that are presented to them in studying Aboriginal content in mainstream sociology subjects. It will also enable educators to reverse the present 'systemic undervaluing of local knowledge and Aboriginal culture, a deeply ingrained unwillingness to "see" more sophisticated Aboriginal knowledge and processes' (Yunkaporta, 2009, 105).

The aim of this project is to develop a pedagogical framework that takes into account indigenous epistemology both in methods and content, so that education will be a process that builds on indigenous cultures and identity (NAEC, 1985). In particular we are working together with Aboriginal students who are 'traversing the cultural interface' (Nakata, 2002, p. 9) and whose stories reveal the consequences of interchanges with western 'ways of knowing'. Also, we will use the stories from non-Aboriginal professionals, who have work experiences with Aboriginal people and understand their perspectives on cultural conflict and importance of Aboriginal knowledge in their fields of expertise. The teaching framework will be developed through discussion with Aboriginal community members, University teaching staff and Aboriginal students. This will provide the design for the online workshop and the game scenarios.<sup>3</sup>

### **A social constructivist immersive learning environment**

The project adopts a social constructivist immersive learning approach that is student-centred. That is, the emphasis is on 'the active role played by the learner as he or she acquires new concepts and procedures' (Lester, Stone and Stelling 1999: 2). To do so, we use an immersive interactive game environment. We do not use a game environment with the objective of simply making learning fun, but as an active constructive experiential medium for teaching non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal knowledge and culture in a non-confronting manner and to create a problem-based learning environment using simulated sessions.

We have chosen to use an immersive learning environment where the focus is on

relationships and interaction as a fundamental aspect of Aboriginal culture, and where a narrative teaching style is used. Understanding relationships is the first priority in teaching Kinship and narratives is the process used by Aboriginal teachers within the context of sharing Aboriginal knowledge. This also provides the opportunity to use narratives from Aboriginal students, staff and Aboriginal community members to convey a variety of perspectives on Aboriginal knowledge to non-Aboriginal students.

The introductory online workshop provides information for students on how Aboriginal Kinship systems work, and how this affects reciprocal responsibilities and relationships within their cultures. Students are then presented with various situations experienced by Aboriginal people following invasion, such as: where Kinship systems were ignored and their culture denigrated. Students are then asked to consider the various effects of European culture, such as: introduced pidgin English language on Aboriginal systems and cultures.

Coherency within a series of narratives will also be improved by allocating stories to three aspects of Kinship: living on their land in Kinship relationships, how Aboriginal people lost access to their land after invasion in a particular cultural conflict, and the ongoing effect of this loss of land on their people living in various professional systems (such as under the legal system or in mainstream health care).

The next immersive aspect is the context. The different scenarios and professional contexts will be designed to suit the learning goals of the subject that the student is enrolled in by placing them in the position of service provider, or deal with cross discipline issues such as research or policy development. The disciplines covered will include social sciences, education, health, social work and law. The scenarios described here are for students enrolled in mainstream units of sociology, social policy and other social science units. However, scenarios will be developed that are relevant to Law students, Social Work students, students studying Education at the University of Sydney.

The professional contexts for sociology students may be varied depending on the subject. For example, if it is in relation to a research methods subject, then the contexts relating to research and related scenarios would be more appropriate compared with the professional context of a health service provider that would be appropriate for a student studying the Sociology of Health and Illness.

Since most students that we teach will not go on to work in remote communities, we will provide both scenarios relevant to remote communities (such as if a policy officer was working on consulting and delivering a government program to a remote community and had to go and consult that community; or a researcher wished to conduct a study involving a remote community) and a regional or urban scenario (such as assigning the student to an Aboriginal client in health related, social work or legal services). This will enable the student to realise that Aboriginal cultures are still alive today and are practised even in the cities, although often in an adapted form, for instance where family groups replace Clans.

What is important is that students will learn the oral stories their future Aboriginal client will have heard throughout their life, such as the historical problems with governments and government programs or police and courts, as well as the day-to-day experiences of individuals in court.

The final immersive aspect is to allow students to relate as an Aboriginal character within the culture, and to then stand outside and consider how that aspect of Kinship is enacted in their own culture. Students who participate in the Kinship workshop will be provided a scenario to transverse, where the range of comments provided will inform them of different peoples' experience relevant to that scenario. The repository of stories can be continually updated so that the stories available will be varied over each game.<sup>4</sup> The next section discusses these teaching methods further before giving an example scenario.

### **Teaching methods**

There are three methods used in the online workshop to provide for immersive learning which apply a number of social constructivist learning strategies such as a situated learning experience, role playing and adopting problem-based, and creative learning approaches (Huang, Rauch and Liaw 2010: 1173-1175).

The first is in an abstract form, where the workshop presents Aboriginal views and explains what is being done within Aboriginal cultures and social systems to preserve their specific societies and the environments in which they live, and presents how this varies from non-Aboriginal culture. For example, 'Kinship' is used in all cultures to establish the responsibilities you have for those closest to you. In Aboriginal societies Kinship obligations have to work across Family, Clan and Nation groups spread across Australia. This has led to a complex system of rules, such as restricting marriage to distant relations. In larger societies, such as British 'Kinship' obligations are restricted to immediate biological relations and often not linked to marriage rules.

The second is by analogy from known experience, where aspects of 'culture' are selected, and then students are asked how this would affect relations, responsibilities or survival within a particular cultural context. Three examples of this strategy are to:

1. Imagine you are welcoming someone to your 'Country'. What would you explain to them so they are aware of the basic rules and obligations within your society?
2. Remember the place you grew up and all its features. Then imagine if your parents, their parents, and so on also lived on the same land, and could tell you how the land changed over millennia of time, the geography of the land and where and how all the animals on this land lived; how to care for the land and its inhabitants; and through this how to respect the 'Land'. What would your connections and relation to the land be?
3. Consider what are your obligations to you parents and siblings, and how are they in turn responsible for you? What does this mean when your first, second and third cousins and those once, twice removed are considered to be in the same relationship

as your parents and sibling?

The third approach is to use a generic story framework and continually build on this, as in the corroboree narrative structure of traditional cultures (Langton, 1997). A scenario provides the coherency and context of the learning, but different stories can be linked to each character or agent in the scenario, telling different stories that relate to that context and so increasing the depth of their knowledge, while always linking back to their previous experience in this scenario.

### **Example Scenario**

For example, we may provide a cultural conflict scenario based on the professional ‘policy’ context that puts the student in the role of policy officer from New South Wales Health. They will be meeting with a local Aboriginal community to consult with that community about a proposed upgrade of housing under *Closing the Gap: 10 years of Housing for Health in NSW*, as well as conduct a survey of local housing to assess what needs to be repaired and replaced in Aboriginal community housing within that community (NSW Department of Health 2010). The educator provides material specific to their subject and selects the stories for their students, these stories will then be auto assigned to agents that they match in the game (e.g. Kinship relations, gender, age, etc.). The student will be assigned Kinship levels. On commencing the game, the student becomes an agent in relationship to all the other computer-generated agents in the game. Also such cultural conflict scenarios may start with a generic story that can be used for all such disciplines.

The student will go into the immersive environment and be introduced to their Aboriginal community, maybe with a welcome song. The student will then meet different people in the community. If the student talks/listens to unaligned Kinship relations, or if they stop stories half way through, the next stories they hear will be the ‘cultural conflict’ stories from a person in that role. These will tell the student how the local Aboriginal community does not trust/talk to someone of their profession/background/job title, etc. To get back ‘into culture’ to hear stories about the present culture and how it works in relation to their profession, they have to perform a task (others may do this task voluntarily).

The task will involve the following scenario: The student will read some instructions from the teacher, for example, to research the history of housing in the community, or how a particular housing policy may have affected the community in the past. The student will listen to a set of stories, again selected by the teacher on the topic, in this case housing.

The stories students hear in a scenario will depend on which characters they encounter, so they may hear different ones from their friend – imagine the conversations, ‘did you hear the one about...’. Each story, or series of stories will be followed by a series of question (added to each story by their author or from the teacher). Then the student may provide a report, what they have learnt, on how housing policy has affected the community.

Alternatively, they may go back then to the original scenario in the community, where people talk to the student about how they live, what they do, what they like, etc. At the end they will be asked to present a new approach to housing policy for the community they have been in.

At various points in the interaction, such as when they finally arrive at the meeting with the community to start the process of consultation about the proposed upgrade of housing, they will be given a series of questions and multiple-choice answers to help them understand if they either have gathered the issues of conflict and ability to understand and hear the community, or they have failed to do so.

Using the principles of constructivist e-learning environment, such as concept mapping, problem-based learning, an educational game, and the ability to monitor progress and provide users with feedback, are important features of our immersive learning environment, which will contribute significantly to how students learn about Aboriginal knowledges in this online environment. Importantly, the knowledge being shared is based on lived experiences and provided by Aboriginal people themselves.

The single-user world will include an interface map or image to allow students to select 'rooms' and 'buildings' representing each of the areas of study (at present we are considering law, education, social work and sociology). Clicking on a room/building, the student selects stories relevant to that profession, but from an Aboriginal perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The ability to provide, a safe place for Aboriginal people to share their stories and cultural knowledge; as well as a place for educators and students to access Indigenous knowledges relevant to different University disciplines is a hard task. We hope this software and the learning environment will provide a format that allows many Aboriginal people to provide their stories for learning and many non-Aboriginal people to learn from stories that provide experience pertinent to their profession.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is one of a number of papers that are being generated as part of this project. The other papers focus on: the information technology dimensions and design features of the project; the use of story-telling as narrative in online environments; the project methodology; and the adopted narrative teaching style.

<sup>2</sup> At an institutional level, the project is a collaborative strategy between Aboriginal academics in the Koori Centre and non-Aboriginal academics in the Division of Law, Arts and Social Science, Education and Social Work. University project partners include the University of New South Wales and Edith Cowan University.

<sup>3</sup> Different scenarios will be based on three interconnected influences: (1) Kinship

relations, (2) cultural conflict, and (3) professional systems, which will give both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students the opportunity to select scenarios with information relating to a range of professional contexts, such as policy, research and service provision, in urban and rural Aboriginal communities. For example, the student who is learning about the protocols that the non-Indigenous researcher needs to follow in engaging with Aboriginal communities or organisations will be directed into a cultural conflict scenario. Whereas another student, involved in developing personal relationships within an Aboriginal community, would be directed into a scenario based on Kinship levels. On the other hand, the student who would be considering how government departments may engage in research with Aboriginal communities and organisations may be offered a scenario based on the relevant professional system. This will ensure that students gain a better understanding of the different scenarios and contexts that exist in cultural learning. Some scenarios are given below.

<sup>4</sup> We are still designing how to move from narratives linked to the focus material into virtual worlds.

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