

Cultural Capability with James Blackwell, Kath Gelber and Morgan Brigg

Voiceover

Welcome to “Indigenising Curriculum in Practice” with Professor Tracey Bunda and Dr Katelyn Barney.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Hi, everyone. I’m Tracey Bunda and welcome to our podcast series, “Indigenising Curriculum in Practice”. I’m a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and the Professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Queensland. It has been my responsibility to lead Indigenisation of the curriculum as a key activity of the UQ Reconciliation Action Plan. I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging Country and the various Countries from where our listeners are located, and pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. I acknowledge the ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to society at local, national, and international levels.

I’m joined by my colleague and co-host Dr Katelyn Barney.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Hi everyone. I’m Katelyn. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands where we’re recording, and pay my respect to the ancestors and their descendants. I also want to acknowledge that we’re recording this podcast on Aboriginal land and it has always been a place of learning and teaching. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country, and in this series, Tracey and I are interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they’re Indigenising curriculum through a look at case studies across the faculties at the University of Queensland.

Our theme for the podcast is based on the principle of cultural capability and our guests today are James Blackwell from the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, and Professor Kath Gelber and Associate Professor Morgan Brigg from the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. Welcome.

Prof Tracey Bunda

It’s really great to have you all here today. Can I ask you to introduce yourselves in whatever way you feel comfortable?

James Blackwell

Firstly, thank you Tracey and Katelyn for having me. I’m James Blackwell. I’m a Wiradjuri man. I’m currently based at the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific here at Canberra. My research looks at Indigenous diplomacy and how Indigenous peoples conceptualise within international relations. I’m a former colleague of both Kath and Morgan up till about 2020.

Professor Kath Gelber

I’m Kath Gelber. I’m the head of the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, and thank you for having me.

Associate Professor Morgan Brigg

Thanks very much for having me. I'm a white fella or a migloo or a gogai, whatever term you would like to use, and I was brought up in Central Queensland on the lands of Darumbal people. I'm now an Associate Professor in Political Science with Kath in Kath's school, where I work on creating an exchange between Indigenous and Western political philosophies and systems.

Dr Katelyn Barney

As part of the school's Reconciliation Action Plan Implementation Plan, the School of Political Science and International Studies developed a tip sheet for incorporating Indigenous scholarship. Can you talk a bit about the process of putting that tip sheet together?

James Blackwell

Back in 2019/2020, the School was tasked, as all the Schools were, tasked with responding to UQ's Reconciliation Action Plan, or RAP. As part of that, we're looking at what the schools specifically can do with regard to the overall RAP's goals and the kind of specific areas it tasks schools to work on, and one of the things that we came together with, we wanted to have more Indigenous content, more Indigenous scholarship within the school's curriculum and within the schools kind of teaching programs. So, we developed this idea of we were going to develop some kind of curriculum guide for both the kinds of things staff can and should be putting in their coursework but also how they can go about doing that.

Kath, Morgan, myself, and others who worked on this, I think the concern we had was staff would find it too difficult or may you know, they've not done this before, they don't really know what to do so the idea of a tip sheet, and kind of guide to this work was to give them that kind of assistance, that kind of jump into this work of curriculum development, curriculum redesign, specifically about Indigenous peoples, help them along the process as it can be somewhat of a difficult process or a kind of complex process if you're new to it. So we kind of felt with the idea of a tip sheet it gives staff a starting point from which to kind of delve into the work.

Prof Tracey Bunda

And I think that work has been exemplar for other parts of the university as well. One of the design principles developed as part of the UQ Indigenising Curriculum is cultural capability. Would you mind to talk to us about how this work has the potential to build cultural capability of non-Indigenous staff?

Professor Kath Gelber

Like James said, a purpose of the tip sheet was to help staff into an area that they might find challenging, and when we were having conversations in the school about this, we had people express views including that they didn't know how to do it, that they were a bit reticent or scared about what this might do in the classroom, and they weren't sure how to handle those conversations, or even that they weren't really sure how Indigenous perspectives fitted into their branch of the discipline. And so, we wanted to provide them with a mechanism... with a bit more confidence about how to approach this, we wanted to encourage them to do it, and give them a bit more confidence and an ability, sort of some tips and some hints about how to think about what they were doing because, you know, increasing the number of, for example, the number of readings written by Indigenous authors is a good thing to do, but we wanted to do more deep work than that.

We wanted people to think about the concepts and ideas; we're a political science department – we deal a lot in ideas and concepts and a lot of those ideas and concepts are all discussed in Indigenous ways of knowing, in ways that many of our staff are not aware of, and we thought that could bring a richness to the curriculum so we really wanted to help people to do that.

Associate Professor Morgan Brigg

And I think the grounded genesis of the materials that ended up appearing in the tip sheet is really important here. In fact, it was at one of our teaching retreats – I forget the year exactly where we were discussing incorporating Indigenous perspectives and content into our perspectives that some of our colleagues addressed some of their concerns; their nervousness about doing this sort of work, and as a flow-on piece of work after that teaching retreat, Alyssa McCune, Dr Alyssa McCune, and I assembled the range of concerns that staff had and then provided a range of responses to that, answering and directly grappling with their concerns.

And I think that grounded basis for this work is one of the reasons it's been received so well by a range of colleagues.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Yes, I really like within the tip sheet that you have tips for non-Indigenous academics to acknowledge and address your own assumptions, and as you guys have talked about, your non-Indigenous academics can feel uncomfortable about engaging with the content. Can you talk a bit about this and the ways forward you think for non-Indigenous staff to engage with Indigenous scholarship and also redesign curriculum?

James Blackwell

An Indigenous person working with non-Indigenous colleagues, yeah, discipline – I think the main concern you get is kind of around their discomfort, and that is the main concern, in various different forms. I think for me, it's about them embracing that discomfort; kind of owning it a little bit and going, "It is going to be a bit uncomfortable. This is new work for you, this is a new area in which you're delving into in your classroom, and potentially, hopefully, your research practice as well. It's about acknowledging that in an authentic and genuine way with a desire to do better and a desire to improve what you're teaching to students, but also how you're teaching the students".

We're in Australia, we're on a continent that is stolen land; no matter where you are on the continent, we have a rich Indigenous history that pre-dates, you know, the white discipline of international relations or political science, both here in Australia and globally – you know, it's important that we acknowledge that when we're teaching our discipline as political scientists, as international relations scholars that we actually include and incorporate the knowledges and the perspectives that Indigenous peoples around the country have had and have and maintained on these issues. The way forward is kind of acknowledging that discomfort, acknowledging that it's going to be difficult.

So, I say often to colleagues when we had these discussions even here at the ANU, "You are going to fuck up. It will happen and that's fine. It is not the end of the world. You're going to make these mistakes but for a lot of students, it's about being authentic and being genuine in this work and acknowledging that you come from a position of privilege". And again, all these things are in the tip sheet in fact – we've got a lot of detail and the responses generated by Morgan and Alyssa and even Liz Strakosch and the work that's in there but helping staff

go through that sort of uncomfortableness and that kind of discomfort that they feel internally – that's the important thing is non-Indigenous staff owning that discomfort a bit.

Associate Professor Morgan Brigg

Just building on what James said there, I think a lot of academics feel an expectation that they must speak with authority in their discipline area, and they feel that expectation; sometimes that's very internalised into their own identity, their own sense of self and their own sense of worth. In terms of engaging with Indigenous knowledge and perspective is part of what I and a lot of colleagues would say is that this in fact is part of the problem, and in fact, if we're able to be a little bit more open to the fact that knowledge is not produced entirely by a sovereign and self-sufficient and fully authorised self, but it's always a collective and relational exercise which has all sorts of contingencies and mistakes and so on, as James is pointing about.

If we let go of some of those dominant ways we think about what an academic is and what authoritative knowledge is, there's pathways to open to engagement with Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous peoples.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Curriculum development takes time as we all know, and there are many challenges in doing this work. What other resources and support do you suggest for academics to assist then in Indigenous curriculum to make a culturally safe classroom?

Associate Professor Morgan Brigg

I'd like to give, I guess, a little bit of an oblique answer to that to say of course there's a technical exercise here, there's a technical work of working with literature and materials that academics work with all the time, but in Australia, we are blessed with an incredible production by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all sorts of novels and artwork and other types of materials. And I think if academics engage with some of these materials that they don't normally engage with in their normal everyday academic life – they'll get exposed to insights and perspectives which will allow to, in a sense, feel their way into these issues, and if they begin to feel their way into these issues and connect more deeply with what's at stake, well then that's the key resource that they need to create a culturally safe classroom.

Professor Kath Gelber

Yes. I'd also add that we encourage our staff to make use of the very wide range of resources that's already available, right, so they don't need to start from scratch; the University of Queensland library has some really excellent resources, but also to other organisations around the country, and so, there are a lot of resources already available that people aren't making as best use of as they can.

So, we encourage people to make use of those resources, we have part of our website that's only open to staff, we have links to various other resources that people can go to. The tip sheet is part of a much larger group of activities and the other thing that we've done is we regularly – a couple of times a year, once or twice a year – have conversations, working lunches where we have conversations about managing the classroom. We recently had another one on equity, diversity, and inclusion in the classroom where we talked about universal design learning, making sure that you take into account the diversity of people in the room, making sure that you set clear boundaries to ensure the safety of people in the

room, making sure that if those boundaries are violated that you take appropriate action around that, around respecting one another in the classroom and so on. We try to kind of do continuous... I mean, obviously nothing's perfect, but we just try to provide a range of different resources for staff to increase their confidence in tackling these kind of issues in the classroom so that, for students and for staff, it's safe.

James Blackwell

All those points Morgan and Kath made are quite good. I think the other thing is kind of the elephant in the room perhaps is financial resourcing. The school, in developing this, did put a bit of money behind it in terms of paying someone to do it – that was myself. Other schools I know have done similar work and again, they've put some money behind people developing these resources – it doesn't take a lot of money, we're not talking millions of dollars - sometimes require a bit of financial incentive to kind of get some of this stuff off the ground, and even if not financial incentive, time. I think that was a thing we heard back in 2019/2020 and it's the same now is staff are very busy, staff are overworked, often underpaid, we're doing a lot of things all at one and schools around the country I think need to set aside some time for this and I think show that it's a priority.

You know, we had a number of teaching retreats, and a number of staff workshops on this project when I was at UQ and at the ANU, we have regular staff forum-type workshops again on this issue, so I think that's also another way in which we can support staff by showing them this is a priority, it's something the school that our students and the discipline needs us to be doing and so where we can make time and financial contributions, you know, we need to be doing that because that kind of sets the tone I think for staff working on this going, "Oh look, the school's actually telling us we need to do this and they're showing us that there's time set aside, potentially there's a small budget set aside for development of the work".

And that I think is really important because if we don't show that it's valuable in terms of our resourcing of it, well then it's not showing it as valuable I think in terms of the kind of... in the minds of staff.

Prof Tracey Bunda

My last question for today is the podcast is called "Indigenising Curriculum in Practice". What does that mean to you?

Professor Kath Gelber

To me that means that the practice is ongoing. This work will never be done. We'll never be able to tick-a-box and say "We're done with this". We have new students coming in every year, we have new staff members coming in all the time, we have shifts and changes in the discipline, and so this work is ongoing. It's a practice and if we embrace it and keep working with it then we'll make some progress.

Associate Professor Morgan Brigg

And it's also not a narrow technical practice as I was trying to highlight before. I think we're engaged in a much larger civic exercise actually, of finding ways to live responsibly and be responsible on Aboriginal land. James highlighted before that wherever we are on the continent, we're on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander land and if we do this work, then we do, in incremental ways, contribute to making Australia a better country.

James Blackwell

Indigenising Curriculum in Practice – yeah, I think I agree with what you said before; it is a continual journey. It's not a one-and-done, you know, tick this and it's done. Even in terms of this tip sheet, you know, we had a lot of UQ staff forward it around to staff at other universities around the country and it ended up getting a lot of kind of really positive feedback and a lot of requests to actually make it public. So we ended up putting it as a Google Doc that kind of exists in a public way that more staff can access it, but even then I know colleagues at other universities that have taken what we've done and just started their own tip sheets for their own universities and are continually updating, like in terms of the scholarship on this list you know, it's set in 2020 – it needs a bit of an update but the idea that there's so much new scholarship in the last three years, there's so much new content, new material, new knowledges from Indigenous people that has come into the world or has been written about in the last three or so years since this was developed.

So, it really is an ongoing journey about keeping up-to-date with what Indigenous people are saying. The idea of a Voice and a referendum, sure, existed three years ago but whether you're talking about actual like voting and constitutional change now in 2023. The things that are occurring, the things that are existing, the things that black fellas are talking about or writing about and discussing are constantly evolving, and constantly being added to, so that really is, for me, it's about making sure this work is... you're continually addressing it, you know, classrooms change, lists were developed, teaching with that in person. Now a lot of classrooms are hybrid or at least during Covid they were entirely online but how do you create a culturally safe classroom when you're all on Zoom and you can't see the students' faces?

Those questions keep evolving and keep occurring as circumstances change, so I think I'd agree with the past comments that this really is a journey, really is an ongoing thing, you know, how on Indigenous land and on stolen land is continual so that our journey through Indigenising Curriculum and culturally safe classrooms should also be continual.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Thanks so much James, Kath, and Morgan for joining us. It was a really insightful discussion around Indigenising Curriculum in Political Science and International Studies, and thanks for joining us for this episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice.

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