Aboriginal knowledge, the history classroom and the Australian university

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Received 12 April 2021
Revised 21 October 2021
Accepted 5 November 2021

Abstract

Purpose – This article considers the impact of competing knowledge structures in teaching Australian Indigenous history to undergraduate university students and the possibilities of collaborative teaching in this space.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors, one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal, draw on a history of collaborative teaching that stretches over more than a decade, bringing together conceptual reflective work and empirical data from a 5-year project working with Australian university students in an introductory-level Aboriginal history subject.

Findings – It argues that teaching this subject area in ways which are culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, and which resist knowledge structures associated with colonial ways of conveying history, is not only about content but also about building learning spaces that encourage students to decolonise their relationships with Australian history.

Originality/value – This article considers collaborative approaches to knowledge transmission in the university history classroom as an act of decolonising knowledge spaces rather than as a model of reconciliation.

Keywords Indigenous knowledge, Ways of knowing, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, Teaching Indigenous history, Collaborative knowledge transmission

Paper type Research paper

Historicising Indigenous knowledges in the neoliberal university

Universities, and the scholars who work in them, have long imagined them as places where knowledge is created, nurtured and transmitted. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have often experienced universities as resistant to the kinds of radical change that might be required to truly make space for Indigenous knowledges and voices – despite waxing and waning talk about embedding Australian Indigenous content in the curriculum. This tension is paralleled in other settler-colonial nations since the violence of colonisation was (is), in part, enacted through such educational systems (Tuck and Yang, 2012). The neoliberal university of the 21st century has not fundamentally reconstituted its role as a colonising force. Rhetoric about institutional commitment to equity and inclusion only makes it more difficult for universities to confront the ways in which their policies and practices contribute to the normalisation of whiteness (Smith *et al.*, 2021; Watego, 2021).

This paper forms part of a special section "The history of knowledge and the history of education", guest edited by Joel Barnes and Tamson Pietsch.

The authors would like to acknowledge that the student data collection discussed in this article began as part of an ACU Teaching and Development Grant, "Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum—for staff and students". That project, mentored by Associate Professor Theda Thomas, had two strands, one based in the ACU National School of Education (led by Associate Professor Nerida Blair) and one based in the ACU National School of Arts (led by the authors). We would like to thank and acknowledge these women, and all of the other staff who participated in the project's workshop, for their contributions to the big picture thinking that prompted our longitudinal study.

History of Education Review
Vol. 51 No. 2, 2022
pp. 123-136

0819-8691
DOI 10.1108/HER-04-2021-0010

This article was inspired by the theme of this special issue – intersections between the history of knowledge and the history of education – not because we seek to write a history of how particular knowledge forms have emerged in the Australian university, but because we see the need to destabilise an apparent confidence in the neutrality and timelessness of "knowledge" which pervades the university classroom. The history of knowledge is a nascent field, and debate remains about some of its most basic concepts, including what the object of study – knowledge – means (Burke, 2020). While some have sought to define the concept of "knowledge" in order to make it containable (Renn, 2015; Marchand, 2019; Bod, 2020), others have seen it as an opportunity to highlight the ways that the forms of knowledge prioritised by Western culture and modernity have limited the ways we conceptualise the term (Elshakry, 2020; Lässig, 2016; Daston, 2017; Burke, 2015). The latter approach, which emphasises knowledges rather than knowledge, is vital in settler-colonial nations, not only because they are places where whiteness – and its associated ways of knowing – has been equated with objectivity and neutrality, but also because the corollary of this has been the compression of Indigenous people into one homogeneous imagined "other" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Australian Aboriginal people and universities have a fraught history. Australia's earliest universities were established as bastions of Western knowledge which excluded Aboriginal people, and worse, legitimised the development of disciplines using stolen bodies, land and knowledge (Forsyth, 2014; MacDonald, 2005). Universities were, and are, sites of contests over power and knowledge – often contests disguised as objective engagements with knowledge – that reinforce knowledge structures linked with colonialism and empire (Connell, 2019; Forsyth, 2014; Pietsch, 2013). Since the 1960s, Australian universities have taken steps towards making space for Indigenous people and knowledges on their campuses and in their curricula, but have tended to resist fundamentally rethinking their ways of knowing or working, and economic pressures often take precedence over long-term commitments to decolonising the academy (Connell, 2019; Kerin, 2016). There are, of course, significant parallels between the Australian case and the entanglements between universities and Indigenous peoples in other settle-colonial nations, although each is embedded in its own specific peoples and histories (Davis *et al.*, 2014; Smith, 2021).

For more than two centuries, modernity, the nation state, universities and academic disciplines have called on one another's authority to establish legitimacy and entrench dominant forms of power and knowledge (Bod *et al.*, 2012; Silva and Vieira, 2009). Those structures are beginning to wane in terms of their unquestionable authority and claims to timelessness, and thus the time is right to rethink *how* we know what we know, and *why* we believe it to be true (Dube, 2017; ten Hagen, 2019; Silva and Vieira, 2009). Scholars in the fields of history of knowledge and Indigenous methodologies have both observed the need to break out of our discipline-based thinking – "undisciplining" – in order to avoid the inevitable reproduction of colonialism (Schneider and Hayes, 2020; Beattie and Morgan, 2021). We apply this way of thinking to distinguish "History" (as a discipline embedded in Western knowledge trajectories) from history (ways of knowing about the past). In particular, we ask how the university classroom might provide a site for decolonising students' senses of truth, history, evidence, knowledge and authority.

We understand that this asks a lot of students, many of whom are not confident at the very prospect of studying history. Across many nations students are reaching university without much pre-existing historical knowledge, and the richness of historical skills imparted in schools is impacted by the frequency with which teachers are required to deliver content outside of their specialist fields (Booth, 2003; Hobbs and Törner, 2019). Most of our students are products of the Australian education system in which Australian history is often unpopular with staff and students because it is perceived as boring and because it is seen as a politically contested zone (Clark, 2008). In theory, recent attention to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the Australian curriculum should have

increased students' exposure to this content by the time they reach university, but we have seen little evidence of this. We suggest that a lack of teacher confidence in delivering the changing curriculum has played a significant role in the avoidance or minimisation of this aspect of the revised curriculum (Reitano and Winter, 2017).

Studying a course that undisciplines history can exacerbate students' senses of uncertainty. When they feel anxious or confused, they often retreat to the perceived certainty and moral neutrality of facts. History of knowledge scholars have shown that "facts" can deliver neither of these things – the processes by which something becomes a fact are always serving particular agendas and, indeed, the very notion of facts as incontestable truths is an historically specific phenomenon attached to Western enlightenment thought (Poovey, 2009; ten Hagen, 2019). As a bastion of Western knowledge, the university also values "the fact" and "the expert", and it is all too easy for staff to fall back into the standard modes of operation and become arbiters of truth and facts. It is much harder to insist that students sit with contrapuntal histories to let the truths settle over time. This may sound like a lofty goal – it is – but asking students to move through spaces of discomfort on their way to completing the course has the potential for genuinely transformative learning experiences. The further we can move students towards "thinking, feeling and doing" Indigenous history, the closer we are to our lofty goal (Lomawaima, 2017, p. 60).

Collaborative team teaching is a valuable tool for engaging students with Australian Indigenous history in ways which are meaningful, as well as culturally and emotionally safe for staff and students. Such collaboration requires more than can be captured through university paperwork; more than agreeing on a set of weekly topics, readings and assessments; more than appointing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff to teaching roles – although these things are all important. It also requires a relationship based on respect, shared authority, and the willingness to undertake a journey of intellectual self-discovery that seeks to understand not only *what* we each see similarly or differently, but also *why* we think, see, hear, speak, write and teach in the ways that we do. This relationship must be embedded in a constant willingness to reflect and adapt. It is more than modelling that non-Indigenous and Indigenous faculty can work together; it is a conscious attempt to decolonise the learning space that tackles head-on a "great struggle between two mutually opposed forces . . . an imperialistic tradition on one hand, and a resistance to tradition on the other" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 2). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was writing about Africa but his sentiment captures the battles over knowledge and ways of knowing that are going on daily in our university classrooms.

We are far from the first to suggest relationship (relatedness) as an essential element of breaking this impasse – publications by Australian Aboriginal scholars have been making this point for decades (e.g. Holt, 1992; Martin, 2008; Fredericks, 2010; Rogers, 2018; Ryan, 2020). Although reciprocity and relationship in research are often discussed in terms of cultural and community safety, we emphasise the extent to which relatedness as a methodology is also about decolonising knowledge production. The pioneering work of Native American scholar Deloria (1999) argued that the history of Western knowledge is the history of denying connectedness and relationality, and that the result is a stagnant and fallible set of accepted truths. Deloria's concept of relatedness insists on the necessity of writing the self into all knowledge production, and importantly, this self exists in relationship with everyone and everything in the universe around us. Writing in the Australian context, seminal Aboriginal scholar Moreton-Robinson (2017, p. 71) argues that an understanding of relationality "grounded in a holistic conception of the inter-connectedness and inter-substantiation between and among all living things and the Earth" is an essential precondition "for coming to know and producing knowledge . . . in a given time, place and land." We follow Deloria and Moreton-Robinson in arguing that placing this concept as central to our thinking and teaching practice enables knowledge creation and exchanges that contribute to decolonising the classroom.

This article adds to a growing body of scholarship reflecting on strategies for decolonising learning spaces – something we argue is especially important in teaching and studying Australian history because that history has so often been deployed to reinforce the national ignorance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the past and present (Price, 2007; Kinnane, 2015; Rose, 2019). A persistent theme within that literature is resistance from students asked to study Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, often followed by heightened emotional responses that are out of proportion to those of students studying other traumatic histories such as the Holocaust. However, avoiding the difficult parts of Australian history to make courses more palatable fails to prepare students for engagement with crucial debates in contemporary society (Holland, 2018; Casey, 2018; O'Dowd, 2012). Increasingly, this literature emphasises the need to privilege and empower Indigenous voices. This can come at a cost to Indigenous staff, whose very "presence can be unsettling for students" (Bond, 2014, n.p.) and who bear the brunt of students' discomfort when presented with ideas that destabilise their senses of history, nation and self (Gatwiri *et al.*, 2021; Brown *et al.*, 2021). The potential for burnout of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics is compounded by the small number employed in Australian higher education, the many demands on their time and knowledge, and the often-invisible work required to fulfil community responsibilities (Asmar and Page, 2018). Collaborative teaching teams that include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff can be a strategy for sharing the load. Our understanding of genuine collaboration aligns with others who have published on their experiences: non-Indigenous staff must be prepared to interrogate their own subjectivity and accept that this work is personal for everyone, not only for Indigenous staff (Daniels-Mayes *et al.*, 2019; Brown *et al.*, 2021).

Context and knowledge journeys

This article explores these big ideas and challenges through a specific case study: the authors' collaborative teaching of an introductory-level (first year) semester-long history unit titled: Australian Indigenous Peoples Past and Present (hereafter referred to by its unit code: HIST106). As a first-year unit, it seeks to impart skills that students will need for advanced-level study of history. However, it is also a unit that is constantly testing the boundaries of what it means to teach and study history. HIST106 is a compulsory unit for all students completing a history major in the Bachelor of Arts, for students training to be history and humanities teachers, and for those enrolled in the Diploma or Bachelor of Youth Work. Students across a range of faculties and degrees often choose HIST106 as an elective, and most years there are a handful of exchange students in the class. Most of the students are non-Indigenous and completed their schooling in Australia, but the classes also include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and international students. Until 2017 we ran classes in Melbourne and Ballarat. Since then, the subject has only been offered in Melbourne. Crafting a subject that is meaningful and useful to all of these cohorts is a challenge in and of itself.

Layered on this is a long-standing commitment to teaching the class in conversation with the local Aboriginal community (more meaningfully understood as communities, plural, especially when the unit was running in both Melbourne and Ballarat). This requires a careful weaving of voices and topics in order to present a history that is intelligible *as history* to students, but which is also explicitly embedded in the present, and which resists some of the forms of history-telling that have underwritten colonisation and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The unit thus exists at a nexus between university and community and, as the people responsible for designing and delivering the subject, we are answerable to our own goals and values, to the university (both in terms of its objectives related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum and in the

sense of delivering high-quality learning and teaching experiences), to our students, and to the local Aboriginal community. There are many threads to weave together, and we acknowledge the many people who have given time and knowledge towards a shared vision over more than 20 years.

The philosophical, pedagogical and institutional contexts for this unit have been carefully considered and reconsidered over time, and in 2015 we commenced a 5-year study of student experiences in HIST106 (Australian Catholic University (ACU) Human Research Ethics Committee approval number 2015-44H). The questions that we posed arose from our personal and shared journeys – teaching in the specific unit, working in the university sector as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, and as politically and historically engaged people with a commitment to social justice – and so here, before providing further detail about our data collection, we write ourselves explicitly into our research.

Naomi Wolfe

I am a trawloolway woman, connected to the north-east of Tasmania, with Jewish German and Irish ancestry. My dad was trawloolway Aboriginal and my mum was non-Indigenous. Both parents have passed away, with my dad dying suddenly, recently, after a misdiagnosis. I am a proud daughter, sister, and aunty and was born, as my dad said, "askin' questions". I have worked at ACU since 1999 and used to head up the Jim-baa-yer Indigenous unit, providing student support, teaching, research and community engagement at the Melbourne and Ballarat campuses, before university restructuring. I now work in the ACU School of Arts (Vic) part time and am also the First Peoples Co-ordinator at the University of Divinity. I teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, world Indigenous histories and also other ancient civilisations such as Ancient Rome. I also teach theology with the international community of NAIITS [1], part of a wider growing community of theologians who are Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Canadian Aboriginal, Native American and other First Nations and Indigenous peoples, also joined by non-Indigenous theologians, who seek to work with, and within, Indigenous theological education. For me, teaching history is a way of giving something back to the wider community after Elders and community who have given me so much in my life. Listening to older community members and hearing their stories of education, or lack of education, made me determined to use my skills to change the system – ha! I recognise that I have access and privilege that is denied to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers and I must remain consciously aware of that so that I do not forget community as I journey as both woman and academic.

Nell Musgrove

I am a non-Indigenous historian, born in Wollongong, but having lived most of my life in Melbourne. My mother migrated from the United States of America in the 1970s to work as a high school physics teacher, and on this side of my family we can trace ourselves back to the *Mayflower*. My father's grandparents migrated from Wales and northern England in the 1920s to work as coal miners in the Illawarra region of New South Wales. Before their migration, my father's maternal line lived in the same Welsh valley for centuries. My primary research area is the history of childhood, particularly the history of children's institutions and foster care in 19th- and 20th-century Australia, and my teaching areas include history of childhood, history of crime, Australian Indigenous history, world Indigenous history, and historical theory and methods. I first joined the HIST106 teaching team as a tutor in 2007, and have been a lecturer in the unit every year since 2010 (sometimes in collaboration with other non-Indigenous staff, and always in collaboration with

Aboriginal staff). My overarching goal in HIST106 has always been the same: to present a narrative of Australian history which writes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the centre of the story, and to help students connect that narrative with Australia as it is today. There is no use telling our students what to think. They are smarter than that, and in any case, such an approach is fundamentally anathema to why I believe the study of history is important. Studying history is about learning *how* to think, not *what* to think. If students are only ever exposed to one version of history, and one framework for considering how knowledge should be conveyed and verified, we have not done our jobs as teachers. Teaching history is about asking questions, not dishing out prescriptive answers. This is always challenging to students, and all the more so in a subject area like Aboriginal history because many of them are reaching out for answers and certainty to ease their sense of standing on unstable ground.

Reflections on our shared journey

Particularly since 2011, the year we began working as formally appointed co-lecturers for HIST106, we have thought about how to break down some of the expectations that students seemed to have upon commencing this unit. Many appeared to have a rather transactional understanding of the learning that was to occur, and to view themselves as passive learners. That is, they expected the classroom to be a place where the content they had to reproduce in assessments would be spelled out for them (Roberts, 2019). For some, this could be as reductive as expecting a list of "facts" for memorisation, while we encountered others looking for authoritative answers – they wanted to know "the true history".

We observed that students often had preconceived ideas about what kinds of knowledge each of us should dispense. Martin Nakata (2010) has argued that the "interface between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific knowledge systems is a contested space where the difficult dialogue between us and them is often reduced to a position of taking sides" (p. 53), and we have found that students would like us to enact such a dynamic. Naomi is typically seen as an endless source of information about Aboriginal people and culture. It would seem that she needs to be a walking encyclopedia for all things, but this is juxtaposed with an almost immediate discounting of information as being "subjective" with validation being sought from Nell. If Naomi is too forceful in her response, then she is positioned as an "angry Aborigine", but if she is too hesitant or takes time to consult with Elders and community before answering a question, then she is often deemed to know too little or is accused of refusing to share information. Questions asked of Naomi are wide ranging and often very personal – something that Nell is not subjected to at all. This takes its toll in ways usually unrecognised by formal university structures (Bond, 2014).

Resisting this implicit positioning can be perceived by students as oppositional or evasive and, as others have observed, it is Indigenous staff who attract student anger (Gatwiri *et al.*, 2021). In modelling relational and culturally respectful modes of engaging, Nell often has to refuse to accept the role of arbiter of "the truth". This can include responding to questions by presenting multiple views on an issue, or asking students to question the premise of their question. For instance, we resist the call to answer questions like, "What do Aboriginal people think about X?" As we tell students from week 1, there is not one Aboriginal view. Students sometimes perceive Nell's responses as part of some deeper agenda of secrecy, but rarely reacted emotively. When Naomi responds in similar ways, she can easily be accused of making students "feel racist". We have observed these kinds of reactions from students over many years, and the following section reports on some of the findings of the research project we conducted seeking better understanding of how students saw their journeys in HIST106.

Data collection and analysis

In the first 2 years of the project, we asked students to participate in a classroom activity related to their overall perception of important events in Australian history in week 1, and repeated this activity in week 12. We asked students to anonymously reflect on why they thought their individual response to the same prompt had either changed or stayed the same. We found, as have others, that students were not always good at identifying the pedagogical elements most influential on their learning (Trinidad, 2020). In year 3 we added a second activity which we called a Time Capsule. At the start of the semester, we invited students to record their answers to two prompts: "The thing I think I would most like to learn/understand better through this unit is . . ." and, "The thing that challenges/worries/concerns me the most about this unit is . . .". At the end of the semester, we asked students to revisit their responses and reflect on whether they felt that their learning goals had been advanced during the semester, as well as three additional questions: "Which parts of the course were most helpful in this? Are there still aspects of the course which you feel unsure about? How might we add or change content or activities to help in future semesters?" Participation was optional.

Of the total number of students enrolled across years 3–5 of our study, 33% of students participated in the week 1 component of the Time Capsule, but only 6% returned for the follow-up, meaning that 17% of students who completed part 1 also completed part 2. As shown in Table 1, there was some variation in participation rates across the 3 years. In year 3 we asked students to complete the Time Capsule activity on paper in week 1 tutorials and then returned their responses for part 2 of the exercise in week 12 tutorials. Participation rates in that year were much lower than attendance rates. In years 4 and 5 we moved the Time Capsule online and invited students to complete it in their own time. This significantly increased the proportion of students who completed part 1 but reduced participation in the second part.

Despite our perception that there was often a negativity amongst students who were enrolled because it was a compulsory unit, only five (2% of responses) made a comment of that nature. We did note, however, that prior experiences of studying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content had a clear influence on student expectation. There were six responses which expressed a concern that there might be an objectionable agenda in the unit, specifically that we might want to make them feel bad or stifle their opinions. Some students, educated in the wake of Australia's so-called history wars, had clearly internalised the view that writing Aboriginal people into Australian history was an exercise in "black armband" history (a term weaponised by social conservatives during the 1990s to dismiss calls to address histories of pain and injustice). One student stated: "I worry that this unit is going to be yet another 'feel sorry for the aboriginals' unit, as much of my primary schooling and parts of my high schooling had been, with previous teachers attempting to get their classes to feel guilt instead of teaching actual content and allowing us to form our own decisions" [2].

	Total enrolment (at census date)	Time Capsule week 1 (number of responses)	Time Capsule week 1 (as % of enrolment)	Time Capsule week 12 (number of responses)	Time Capsule week 12 (as % of enrolment)	Time Capsule retention rate
Year 3	328	58	*18%**	22	*8%*	38%
Year 4	291	119	*41%*	19	*7%*	16%
Year 5	157	79	*50%*	2	*1%*	3%
Total	776	256	*33%*	43	*6%*	17%

Note: *All percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 1. Time Capsule participation rates

There were 16 (6%) responses which conveyed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content had been delivered poorly or barely at all in school. Others expressed frustration at the oppositional history in their school experiences. For example, one student wanted to learn more about the "complexities of the interactions between the Aboriginals and the Europeans, not just the 'Aboriginals = good, Europeans = evil' that I was taught in primary school." Another wrote: "I understand that throughout Australian history since the British arrival there [has] been huge amount of strife and wrongdoing towards the indigenous people. I would love to learn those times where there was peace between the British and indigenous people." Yet even amongst students who expected what might be termed a "black armband" approach, not all saw this in a negative light. Some wanted to know more about the "suffering and hardship that Indigenous Australians felt and how their culture has evolved post British settlement" and, overall, the week 1 responses conveyed a sense that students felt there was something positive to be gained from placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their experiences at the centre of the conversation.

While the historical discourses flowing from the history wars had clearly left some students suspicious about the unit's "hidden agenda", they deployed language quite differently. For those of us who were adults during the Prime Ministership of John Howard (1996–2007), the phrase "balanced history" invokes the view of Howard and his Allies that the push to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives was a threat to an otherwise balanced view of Australian history, one that underwrote conservative views of citizenship and national pride. However, when the students in our study (who were almost all children during the Howard era) used the phrases "balanced" or "well-rounded" they seemed to be suggesting something different. For example: "I would like to learn Australian history with a more well rounded perspective, especially one that does not exclude Indigenous Australians."

The Time Capsule responses confirmed our expectation that while many students were open to hearing a new version of Australian history, they were often still seeking a definitive account. There were 27 students (11%) who expected to be given timelines or facts to explain "how it actually was" in the past. Others wanted: "More accurate understanding of Australian history"; or "The truth on how indigenous Australians felt when the first settlers came". Some responses reflected a more nuanced relationship with history, writing that they were interested in history "through different perspectives and positions of people in time", or "different versions and perspectives of Australian history instead of just one, stereotypical version". There were 38 (15%) who said they hoped to access information about Australian history and Aboriginal people that they felt had been kept from them. Others invoked a sense that as Australian citizens they felt they should know more, but that they had not been given guidance about how to learn without, what they termed, "cover-ups" or "filters".

There were 29 (11%) responses which included statements about wanting to know more about Aboriginal culture through their studies in the unit. Of these, about two-thirds said they wanted to understand Aboriginal people in the past *and* present, but the rest were explicitly interested in pre-colonial Aboriginal culture, seeing that as "authentic". This reflects the persistence of the view that the adaptation of Aboriginal people to survive colonisation equates with a degradation of culture. As Sandy O'Sullivan (2019, p. 108) writes, "for First Nations' Peoples, the externally imposed, narrowed understanding of our identity has frequently shaped our survival". We try to unpack this notion during the semester but, given the very low participation rates for part 2, it is difficult to know how many of these students reconsidered their stance by the end of the semester.

Reflecting more progressive views, seven students (3%) said they thought it was important to hear directly from Indigenous people. Most of these said that HIST106 gave them an opportunity to do this, although two criticised the unit for not employing an Aboriginal member of staff. Given that Naomi is introduced to students in week 1 as an Aboriginal person, the comments suggest that some students equated stereotypical

Aboriginal appearance with "authentic" Aboriginal identity. Neither of these students completed week 12 Time Capsule, but a third student who did complete part 2, wrote: "The only thing I would highly consider is having an Australian Indigenous guest speaker … talking about their ancestry and how much their culture means to them." These comments reflect the insidious view that to be Aboriginal requires certain physical characteristics (Carlson, 2016), or that urban Aboriginal people are "'fake', 'not real' and 'not authentic' because 'real' Aboriginal people belong 'out back'" (Fredericks, 2013, p. 4). These comments were made in very small numbers, but they reflect "deeply pervasive (and persistent) concepts of 'authenticity' wherein some people are designated as 'less Aboriginal', 'less real' or 'less valid' than others" (Fforde *et al.*, 2013, p. 164).

By a clear margin the most common concern students expressed was their ability to be successful in a history unit. More than half of the Time Capsules (140, 55%) said students were worried about not having the skills required for: the essay (50, 20%); referencing (35, 14%); memorising facts (23, 9%); and keeping up with the volume of material to study and read (25, 10%). The next most common concern (52, 20%) was about being behind others in terms of pre-existing knowledge – 19 (7%) explained this was because they had not grown up or studied in Australia. These concerns relate equally to other first-year units, yet in HIST106 the anxiety about these perceived skills gaps is palpably elevated (Thomas, 2018). Some students were candid about the aspects of this subject that they found particularly confronting. There were 40 students (16%) who said they were worried about being able to express themselves using correct and respectful terminology; 28 (11%) concerned about being perceived as racist; and 28 (11%) anticipating being made to feel guilty or unsettled by the version of history presented to them. People teaching Indigenous content in other disciplines have observed similar sentiments, suggesting that these feelings may have been more pervasive than our students were willing or able to admit in writing (Green and Baldry, 2013).

Only 43 students gave a week 12 Time Capsule response (17% of the total who gave week 1 responses). Most tended to "tick off" whether they had met their expectations and goals as stated at the beginning of semester without clear reflection on how, why, or what within the course had facilitated this. Although based on small numbers, we were interested to see that 11 students (26% of those who gave a week 12 response) noted the value of hearing stories from an Aboriginal lecture – for example: "The most helpful activities within the course were the stories by Naomi." One might at first glance see such comments as positive, but they are indicators of deeper beliefs – that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples tell stories, while others tell history (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). This belies an underlying and ever-present colonial mindset amongst students who are at best partially conscious of their place within the colonial state.

Conclusion

This article argues for the utility of considering how ideas from two fields – the history of knowledge and Indigenous methodologies – intersect in ways which empower decolonising practice in the university classroom. Scholars from both fields have made critical challenges to the perceived timelessness and absolute authority of Western knowledge. We use the concept of undisciplining to express the challenges that both fields have made to the apparently natural structures of knowledge that scholarly disciplines reinforce, and reflect on how this can be enacted in the university classroom to present the past without rendering it unintelligible to our primarily non-Indigenous, Western-educated students. We began our journey together teaching Aboriginal history at a time when reconciliation was the dominant model for framing public conversations about the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in the university curriculum, but over time we have become more and more convinced that this is not a useful framework. Reconciliation as a discourse encourages

non-Indigenous people to apologise, and coerces Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to accept apologies and then "move on".

Reconciliation's ultimate goal is to put everyone (especially non-Indigenous people) at ease. Decolonising discourse is unsettling. By asking students to consider that the things they "know" about Australian history are not only limited by the exclusion of certain "facts", "events" and "evidence" from dominant national narratives, but also by historically and culturally specific forms of recognising knowledge, meaning and truth, we ask them to step into that unsettling space. We challenge them to sit with the notion that they may not fully understand everything we put before them – indeed they may never fully understand some of the conversations we begin in this course. Guiding students through this is fraught with having to negotiate, manage (and sometimes avoid) their emotional reactions. Yet we persist, because it is an important task. As Uncle Victor Hart (2003, p. 15) writes, "The role of teaching for Aboriginal academics is not confined to being merely a professional vocation. For many it is a cultural and traditional practice of resistance to colonialism and bourgeois ideology and practice which is performed at the same time as having to act within those paradigms." As we noted above, there is also good reason for non-Indigenous staff to understand their own personal connections and responsibilities, constituted in different ways and to different communities, in teaching this kind of subject (Daniels-Mayes *et al.*, 2019).

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for many students is the revelation that not all knowledge is available for their consumption. This concept is very familiar to Indigenous peoples – the time, place and relationship must be right – but post-enlightenment Western thinking has equated access to knowledge with freedom and equality, and denigrated the notion that some things are best known only by certain people. Students tend to be suspicious about why some things are "secret" and see this as a failing or obstruction of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Recent work in the history of knowledge has historicised "the expert" to show how the history of knowledge might respond to the current crisis of public failure of faith in expert knowledge (Dupré and Somsen, 2019). We see another value in this work. If the concept of knowledge holders can be historicised, it can also be understood differently in cultural terms. Works which challenge students' senses that their world views and ways of knowing are timeless might also help them see the legitimacy of culturally different knowledge-keeping and knowledge-transmission practices.

Do not underestimate the challenges of teaching in this way. We are trying to build a collaborative learning space that challenges dominant narratives and this takes its toll. Students are often reluctant to unpack their own assumptions in order to "think reflexively about issues that impact on Indigenous communities" (Carlson, 2015, p. 82). The emotional dynamics of this space are volatile, and it is often difficult to be sure what progress we are making. The data collected through our Time Capsule exercise give us optimism that not all of our students are looking for simple answers, but it also confirms that many feel anxious at the prospect of studying Aboriginal history. It is clear that there is much work to be done, but it is critical that we do it because, in the words of Aboriginal educator Professor Jeannie Herbert (2012, p. 96), it is "only by knowing and owning this past that we can fully comprehend what is happening in the present".

Notes

1. The name NAIITS reflects the global expansion of the organisation (formerly North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies). It de-emphasises the centrality of North America and is not an acronym, but rather the formal name of the organisation.
2. We have retained the capitalisation, spelling and grammar as written by students, although we recognise that they likely approached this as an informal writing task.

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