



Indigenous perspectives and the co-curriculum: Towards a decolonising approach to academic language and learning in higher education

Key Words

Indigenous, cultural competence, decolonisation, academic communication

Abstract

In recent years Australian universities have become increasingly concerned with 'inclusion', 'diversity' and 'cultural competence', both more broadly and in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, specifically. For example, our University is in the process of implementing a strategy aimed at developing students' cultural competence and foregrounding Indigenous cultures, experiences and histories in the curriculum across all faculties (Wingara Mura – Bunga Barrabugu/ Creating a thinking path to make tomorrow) (University of Sydney, 2016). Moving beyond ideas of inclusion, diversity, or even social justice, which are firmly grounded in Western value systems and epistemologies, is the concept of decolonisation (Sefa Dei, 2012). Decolonisation is based on an active valuing (rather than mere inclusion) of non-Western knowledge systems and a rebalancing of historically instituted power differentials. Decolonisation asks us to acknowledge and remedy the distorted views held of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples and to be willing to discuss racism in the higher education system (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002), be it overt, covert or casual. This distorted view constructs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives as 'problems' to be solved (Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, forthcoming) and discussion of Indigenous issues is based on a deficit discourse (Vass, 2012). Decolonisation also requires vigilance against deep colonising tendencies whereby non-Western perspectives continue to be ignored or silenced despite our instituted policies and programs (Doane, 2003; McAllan, 2011). The Learning Centre at the University of Sydney, like many of its Australian counterparts, supports students' academic language and learning in three main ways: through one-to-one consultations with students, through central program workshops, and through collaborations with faculty teachers to embed academic language and learning support in the curriculum. While we support the academic language and learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through various initiatives (e.g. orientation and tutor training programs), our role in promoting positive views of Indigenous culture and countering racism is ad hoc (Harvey, Russell-Mundine & Hoving, 2016). In this paper, I provide three examples of a decolonising approach in the three main areas of our ALL work; the first is an example from a central workshop on essay writing; the second illustrates issues around racism and assessment emerging out of a student consultation session; and the third is an example of collaborative curriculum work with faculty teachers. I argue in this paper that due to the reach of our work with students and staff across disciplines in the University; our understanding of the role of communication in social constructions of race and racism; and the relationship-building that is an integral part of our work, ALL specialists are well-placed to move beyond Western notions of diversity and inclusion towards a decolonising approach to Indigenous peoples and perspectives in the higher education context.

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