

Culturally responsive learning, assessment and evaluation strategies for Indigenous teacher education students in remote communities of the Northern Territory of Australia

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher educators at university level have a seemingly conflicting role of designing culturally responsive evaluation and assessment strategies that inform future classroom practitioners yet meet university assessment regulations. This paper reports how this duality is being successfully accomplished within the *Growing Our Own* Indigenous teacher education project run by Charles Darwin University in five remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Australia.

Nakata's (2007b) culturally responsive principles are used as a framework for tailoring evaluation within the teacher education program. These are:

- the need to focus on the graduates' capacity to work in complex and changing terrains,
- the need for curriculum design and evaluation to build on the current capacities and experiences of Indigenous students, and
- the need to provide stronger support for Indigenous students to ensure they engage more rigorously since the challenges they face need more attention in curriculum and evaluation design.

Strategies are described whereby lecturers ensure that learning, assessment and evaluation strategies for Indigenous pre-service teachers reflect their ways of knowing, being and doing, their remote learning context, their world experience, their primary language and their family and community values. These strategies generalise across settings yet might become compromised within the increasing emphasis on nationally consistent standards, and challenge the tendency of teaching primarily to tests rather than to culturally diverse needs found in every classroom.

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Introduction

Various models for supporting Indigenous students to be successful in tertiary study have been evaluated (Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008). These authors suggest that further data are needed to provide information on critical factors within support of Indigenous students if “we are to mount a concerted effort to close the gap” (p. 143) between the success of non-Indigenous and Indigenous tertiary students. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the *Growing Our Own* Indigenous teacher education program, run by Charles Darwin University in five remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Australia, are explored here; these provide another angle to complement the knowledge, wisdom and theoretical solutions that already exist. Pivotal to the success of the project has been the culturally responsive learning, evaluation and assessment strategies utilised. This paper describes and provides examples of how the theory translates into practice.

In the current study, 29 Indigenous tertiary students are completing or have completed their four-year Bachelor of Teaching and Learning degree, in situ, in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The rationale for this mode of delivery and the support provided to students has seen retention of 27 of the students, who have successfully completed half or more of the program; the other two have deferred for a year for personal reasons but are confident they will continue their studies. Five students who already had a Diploma of Education and received credit towards the degree have completed and graduated in May 2010. Remaining students who complete successfully will graduate at the end of 2010.

Background

There was a confluence of several factors that led to the conceptualisation of the *Growing Our Own* Indigenous teacher education pilot. These were (i) the disparity in achievement on national testing scales between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, (ii) the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in remote Aboriginal communities, and (iii) the Australian Government’s Emergency Response (AGER) where 73 communities in the Northern Territory (NT) were identified as requiring Federal intervention to protect human rights, specifically children’s rights, and to improve outcomes for children.

Disparity in achievement

A 2005 national report into Indigenous education which noted the considerable gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes in literacy and numeracy, also importantly drew attention to the gap in Indigenous student attendance and retention to senior secondary education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). The disconnection between home and school frequently leads to poor attendance by learners and, consequently, throughout Australia, national testing reveals that Indigenous learners do not achieve on a par with their non-Indigenous peers. Those in remote schools perform worst of all (MCEETYA, 2008). Nationally, the retention rate of Indigenous students to year 12 is 42.9% as opposed to 75% of non-Indigenous students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The lagging achievement of Indigenous learners is of particular importance in the NT where there is a higher proportion of Indigenous learners than in any other state or territory. The 2008 NT annual report notes that the proportion of the Indigenous population is greatest in the school-aged population with 39.5 per cent in the NT compared to the national average of 4.1 per cent. The next highest school aged

Indigenous population is found in Tasmania where it is 6 per cent. Projections show that by 2014 Indigenous learners will make up 50 per cent of the school-aged population in the NT (Northern Territory Government, 2008).

These statistics highlight the imperative for teacher educators to ensure that teacher graduates are equipped to meet the needs of increasing numbers of Indigenous students in NT schools and to begin to reverse these depressing trends. To begin to address this, it was necessary to analyse why Indigenous students do not perform to the same level as their non-Indigenous counterparts.

High teacher turnover

There is a shortage of Indigenous teachers throughout the NT. Furthermore, remote schools find it extremely difficult to recruit and retain qualified non-Indigenous staff (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006), who frequently feel isolated in remote communities and find teaching and living in a bilingual, bicultural context very exhausting (Maher, 2009). Non-Indigenous teachers delivering a largely Western curriculum are not necessarily well prepared to “make explicit connections between content and literacy goals and the knowledge and experiences students share with family, community, and peers” (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007, p. 98). This in turn leads to disaffection on the part of students and despondency on the part of teachers. Consequently, there is a high turnover of teachers and difficulty in recruitment. The resultant lack of continuity for children, which negatively affects their progress, contributes to a national crisis (White et al., 2008). The shortage is likely to become more acute over the next ten years “due to age-based retirement” (MCEETYA, 2004, p. 1).

Curriculum disjunction

There is frequently dissonance between the Western curriculum delivered in schools and the cultural values and aspirations of Indigenous children and their families. Many are learning through medium of their second or third language and some curriculum content is meaningless in their context. Often, parents have not had a positive experience with schooling and offer little encouragement to their children to attend regularly, nor is there a high expectation of success on the part of both parents and teachers. Sarra (2003) has exhorted educators of Indigenous children to embrace three things: high expectations, high expectations, and high expectations.

Emergency response funding to upgrade Indigenous Assistant Teacher qualifications

In 2007 the Australian Government initiated what is known as ‘The Intervention’ in response to a report which detailed high levels of abuse and neglect of children in some remote Indigenous communities. There have been mixed responses to the Intervention, but one positive result was the availability of funding for initiatives that would improve outcomes for children in these communities. Members of Charles Darwin University (CDU) and the Catholic Education Office (CEO) of the NT conceptualised a teacher education program which would build on the strengths and Indigenous knowledges of members of the community and target people who are pivotal to the educational success of children in those communities, effectively “Growing Our Own” Indigenous teachers – hence the name of the program.

Assistant Teachers (ATs), one of whom is employed for each class in remote schools, are the people involved in the program. They support the non-Indigenous classroom teacher, speak the local language, are able to speak English and can translate for the children when necessary. Indigenous ATs in the NT frequently have some form of tertiary qualification, often a Certificate III or IV in education support from Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Training and Education. Often, the Indigenous AT is the mainstay in the children's education as a series of different non-Indigenous teachers rotate through the year. Where the system works best is where the teacher and the Indigenous AT plan together and employ a team-teaching approach.

CDU-CEO partnership in the Two-Way *Growing Our Own* initiative/pilot

The *Growing Our Own* Indigenous AT teacher education initiative is set in five remote NT schools, which fall within the 73 identified communities in the AGER. These communities are Nguiu on Bathurst Island which has two schools, Daly River, Santa Teresa – near Alice Springs, and Wadeye. Current enrolment of Indigenous students across those five Indigenous Catholic Community schools is over 1000 and that number is increasing each year. This strategically bold project approaches teacher education creatively, by providing on-site teacher education in remote communities, allowing a new way of doing, a new way of being.

Aims of the two-ways growing Our Own project

It seemed to the steering committee that past initiatives might have failed because they have come from a colonising perspective where Western knowledge and approaches were foundational to the program. In contrast, the *Growing Our Own* approach is culturally responsive and pedagogically strong in that it aims to:

- empower Indigenous ATs to join culturally relevant ways of knowing, being and doing with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, and
- empower non-Indigenous teacher mentors to understand culturally relevant Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing and infuse these with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge to strengthen opportunities for children's learning.

In these remote communities, all people have English as an additional language; they speak their Indigenous language and often other Indigenous languages as well. In all communities, even where there are several different clan groups, members "go to country", by which they mean their own lands. It is customary for them to be away from the town for up to six weeks at a time "for ceremony" where they enact the rituals and ceremonies of their forefathers. During these times they mostly eschew any implements that have become available since the coming of Europeans to Australia. They choose to live for six weeks as their forefathers did for many, many centuries. In this way traditional cultural mores remain strong and intact. Foundational to the *Growing Our Own* program was making this knowledge a key pillar of learning. Clearly there are significant differences from one community to the next, but the principle of using the particular Indigenous knowledge of each community as pivotal to the teaching in the program, was applicable in all five contexts.

Theoretical underpinnings of the program

One of the myths that persists is that teaching is largely intuitive and, in a transmission model, someone who knows something teaches it to others.

“However, as mountains of research now demonstrate, this notion of transmission teaching doesn’t actually work most of the time” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 8).

The *Growing Our Own* teacher education program, therefore, ensures a balance between the content preservice teachers need to know from a curriculum perspective, the theory of teaching and learning, and the opportunity to put theory into practice. Specifically, it starts from the premise that Indigenous ATs’ cultural knowledge is the foundation on which the program content will build. On graduation and with some experience, Indigenous teachers in remote Indigenous communities are likely to be or become leaders as they accept the mandate from the community to fulfil the responsible role of fully-fledged classroom teacher. It is well documented that Teacher-leaders should be sensitive to the whole context of the institution and be aware of all the forces at work and how they interplay (Bottery, 2004). Local Indigenous teachers are better placed to function effectively in this way, at the cultural interface as described by Nakata (2007a), than non-Indigenous teachers.

Practical model for implementation

The *Growing Our Own* model involves delivering CDU’s Bachelor of Teaching and Learning Preservice degree to Indigenous ATs in their home communities and schools with the support of two-ways teacher education which builds on the skills and expertise held by the Indigenous ATs, who induct and support qualified classroom teachers into their culture and the community whilst learning curriculum and pedagogical knowledge from them. This model recognises Indigenous ATs’ strong sense of personal and cultural identity, their quest for positive educational futures for their communities and a desire to gain an initial teacher qualification and NT Teacher Registration. Equally, it recognises the classroom teachers’ need to work in more culturally and educationally significant ways with Indigenous learners. Importantly, the *two-ways* approach recognises and values both sets of participants’ ability to support each other to develop the understandings and skills needed to teach effectively in remote Indigenous schools and communities.

Specifically, the *two-ways* orientation of the program

- incorporates personal and cultural identity as key pillars of learning,
- develops school ways of knowing and doing that better connect with family and community, and
- provides a foundation from which Indigenous teachers and non-Indigenous teachers become two-ways strong within and across cultures.

ATs are paired with mentors and CDU lecturers to collaboratively work through the CDU teacher education program on a one-to-one or small-group basis while simultaneously teaching. The program operates fast track on a term-by-term basis with the AT linking theoretical learning with day to day classroom practice. Using four school terms and personalising learning, provides a unique opportunity to deliver culturally relevant *in-situ* pedagogy.

The *Growing Our Own* model of teacher education values the wealth of knowledge, competence and skill that Indigenous participants bring to their schools

and communities, and it values this knowledge as the base for contemporary curriculum and pedagogy. The *two-ways* focus means that both Indigenous ATs and non-Indigenous teacher mentors will develop strong foundations in both the culture of the community and the school. This supports them to:

- infuse cultural identities and knowledge with professionalism as a teacher
- promote children’s learning and spiritual well being in authentic ways
- actively engage families, community and Elders
- connect their personal knowledge and contemporary teaching and learning theory and practice and
- support the development of home languages (where relevant) while nurturing the parallel development of Standard Australian English.

Evaluation principles and practice in the *Growing Our Own* model

In the *Growing Our Own* project, teaching, learning and evaluation are interlinked, finely nuanced threads that weave together to form the fabric of the teacher education program. What students learn and experience in lectures one day a week, they put into practice with children in their classes on the other four days a week. Lecturers and the students are developing the capacity to build “bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities” (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

Principles

Consistent with the notion of complex teaching, the *Growing Our Own* model requires that lecturers hold central Nakata’s (2007b) culturally responsive principles and that these are used as a framework for tailoring the content and evaluation within the teacher education programme. These are:

- the need to focus on the graduates’ capacity to work in complex and changing terrains
- the need for curriculum design and evaluation to build on the current capacities and experiences of Indigenous students and
- the need to provide stronger support for Indigenous students to ensure they engage more rigorously since the challenges they face need more attention in curriculum and evaluation design. (Nakata, 2007b)

Certainly, the ATs’ situation is complex and the terrain changing as they face the reality of today’s classrooms including aspects noted by Larrivee (2009) of low socioeconomic status, diverse developmental levels, achievement and motivation to learn, and differences in ethnicity.

The challenge lies in Nakata’s (2007b) second and third points. It is necessary to develop curriculum and evaluation which accommodate the experiences and capacities of Indigenous students, yet these are unlikely to parallel the experiences and capacities of non-Indigenous students who will graduate under the same award. It is clearly essential that students in the *Growing Our Own* project achieve the same standards in all curriculum areas as their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Following Nakata (2007b), students are mentored to achieve a balance of knowledge, skills and processes that allow them to explore disciplinary boundaries and indeed join culturally relevant ways of knowing, being and doing with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, which is the first stated aim of the *Growing Our Own* project.

Practice

In this way, the delivery of the teacher education differs from that experienced by students completing the conventional program at CDU. For other students, the facets of learning are more inclined to reside in silos of individual units and students get to make the link between theory and practice, and across curriculum units, only during their days of professional experience. Students in the *Growing Our Own* model are constantly mentored to plan across the curriculum for their teaching – and they complete effectively 320 days of professional experience in this model. Furthermore, all curriculum and theory units are delivered in an interwoven fashion because one lecturer is teaching across all units and is working with only up to four students, tailoring to their individual abilities and needs.

The steering committee worked carefully within CDU's assessment rules' mission statement and objectives (Charles Darwin University, 2008). The overarching statement of the assessment rules is: "All student assessment shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner"; the first objective is: "To ensure that all processes for student assessment are transparent, accountable, flexible, and fair, and maintain consistent academic standards" and the second objective states that assessors are required "to ensure that each assessment task is designed to fulfil the outcomes and objectives of the unit to which it relates" (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 1). The mission and rules provided a central tenet for evaluation within the *Growing Our Own* model. The following definition of assessment positioned the contextual framework within which the steering committee functioned: "Assessment is the process of collecting evidence and making judgements as to how well students have achieved the intended learning outcomes" (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 1).

Clearly within this mission statement and these rules lies the opportunity to tailor assessment in the same way that delivery of course content is tailored. Evaluation tasks completed by students in the *Growing Our Own* model are not different; however they are frequently integrated across units and curriculum areas. Assessment procedures as described in the CDU Assessment Rules (Charles Darwin University, 2008) are clear: assessment has to be conducted in accordance with the accompanying principles. Of the 14 assessment principles in the CDU Assessment Rules, it is the first three that provide the framework within which the *Growing Our Own* evaluation takes place:

"Principle 1: Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn. Assessment should play a positive role in shaping the learning experience of students" (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 10). To achieve this, lecturers ensure that teaching, learning and assessment are interwoven with a great deal of formative feedback provided by peers, as they view videos of each other teaching, and by the lecturer as they are supported to write English to a standard required by a higher education degree.

"Principle 2: Assessment should accommodate individual learning differences in students. Assessment should be based on the objectives and allow students to

demonstrate outcomes in appropriately diverse ways” (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 10). Students in the *Growing Our Own* program have generally lower literacy levels than other students enrolled in the same degree. Following principle 2, they are provided with the opportunity to discuss concepts in their language and then to report it in English. Cognitively, these students are advanced, their practice is excellent; it is in the academic literacy sphere that they require additional support.

Principle 3: Assessment should be demonstrably fair to all students. Assessment practices should be inclusive and support equity principles. They should cater for both individual and group diversity. It should be recognised that all assessment models have their limitations and capacity to disadvantage certain students, and every effort must be made to minimise such disadvantage by using an appropriate variety of assessment models. In addition, inclusive language should be used, avoiding gender, racial, cultural or other language bias. (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 11)

Working within the ambit of these principles, assessment is interwoven to a greater degree with teaching for the *Growing Our Own* students in the same way that units are more integrated. In this way, students complete a rich task that meets assessment requirements of several units simultaneously. Specifically, assessment tasks follow CDU’s assessment rules which define authentic assessment as providing “students with the opportunity to engage with the real-world assessment tasks that are relevant and meaningful, especially in the professional context associated with the subject or discipline” (Charles Darwin University, 2008, p. 1). This mandates that assessment should validate the cultural characteristics of the students in the *Growing Our Own* programme. If cultural ways of knowing, being and doing are key pillars of learning, so, too, they need to be the key pillars of evaluation.

Examples

Two examples are provided of student evaluation, following the CDU mission, assessment rules and assessment principles (Charles Darwin University, 2008).

Because of the integrated nature of course delivery, one topic “countering bullying in schools” became a rich task, addressing pedagogy and best practice in several curriculum areas, as detailed below:

- students researched potential ways in which bullying could be countered – a learning outcome from Health and Physical Education,
- they aligned this with the school’s bullying policy – a learning outcome from professional experience 2,
- they prepared a PowerPoint presentation for use in a lesson with children – Health and Physical Education and professional experience 1,
- they trialled some strategies with a variety of age groups of children in an action research model – meeting learning outcomes from the teacher-researcher unit
- they reflected later in terms of child and adolescent development theory why some strategies were more appropriate than others given the ages of the children – meeting learning outcomes from professional experience 2 unit which has child and adolescent development nested in it
- they then linked across to literacy planning for teaching where they had the children creating, viewing and presenting anti-bullying posters which they

displayed in the school – meeting the learning outcomes of literacy units, and

- finally they planned for teaching within the Arts curriculum where children role played situations addressing issues such as when a good friend does tell an adult – meeting evaluation requirements of lesson preparation for Arts and Health and Physical Education and professional experience 1.

Another example is the rich task emanating from the Music curriculum area. In the CDU teacher education program, music falls as part of the Arts, but is a discrete unit in its own right. In this instance students

- chose one of their traditional stories appropriate to the age of the children they were teaching
- composed a song – a new one, not one of their traditional songs
- created a soundscape for the song – an audio recording of background sounds such as the sound of weather, animal vocalisations, or musical accompaniment that creates an appropriate atmosphere to support the story of a song
- completed a painting using their traditional Aboriginal representations of snake, people and fire, for example, representing one theme in the song
- collected items from the bush that could be used creatively as musical instruments
- brainstormed collectively, and then articulated individually, best practice teaching and learning theory as related to the activities they had completed
- considered what they had experienced and how this could be implemented with children in their classes
- discussed for what aged children it would be appropriate to teach this song and complete the same activities with them
- identified achievement objectives from the NT Curriculum Framework (from Essential Learnings, Arts, Literacy and Language, Mathematics) which encompassed the teaching they would do
- completed lesson plans for their classes
- listed adaptations or accommodations they would make for children with specific learning difficulties
- trialled all these teaching and learning strategies with children over a few weeks, recording their renditions on video to use as formative feedback with the children
- encouraged older children to compose their own song derived from a traditional story
- organised a parent evening where the children performed their song for the community and
- kept digital evidence of planning and teaching for their own e-portfolios. (Record from Assistant Teacher reflective journals, 2009)

These rich tasks exemplify how, within the *Growing Our Own* model, teaching, learning and putting newfound knowledge and skills into practice occur seamlessly. It demonstrates, too, how Indigenous knowledge is a key pillar of

learning. While students were completing these tasks, lecturers ensured they became familiar with theory about grouping of children for learning – advantages and disadvantages of mixed ability or homogeneous grouping, ensuring safety of children when out in the bush, legal responsibilities of teachers, adapting the curriculum to specific needs of some children. The list is endless. Formative evaluation was provided primarily by peers, but also by lecturers where appropriate. Summative assessment included students' collaboratively composed song, collaborative soundscape, individual art work, lesson plans, essay on how music could be incorporated into lessons with children in early childhood and also senior primary levels and why it should be, and their e-portfolio. These elements demonstrated that students had met the learning outcomes of several units in their teacher education program: Arts, Music, literacy, inclusive education and professional experience units.

Moderation at three levels assuring quality

Students in the *Growing Our Own* programme have the same learning materials, the same learning outcomes and the same, but tailored, assessment tasks. The steering committee is acutely aware that the program will be intensely scrutinised for standards. Consequently, moderation takes place on three levels. First, lecturers from the five sites bring exemplars of student work to cross-mark and to cross-moderate. Second, the coordinator of the *Growing Our Own* program, who has extensive experience both in Australia and overseas in teacher education, moderates the work and provides advice on the evaluation. Finally, the lecturer, who is teaching all the other students in the traditional model in the same unit, moderates the *Growing Our Own* students' work.

Back to the future

Students in the *Growing Our Own* program are progressing well. Five students have already graduated and a further 20 will probably graduate at the end of 2010. There has been good success and retention of students through their course of study; much of this is due to the way the program is delivered and the support they are offered as described by Nakata (2007b).

As to the future of evaluation within programs such as *Growing Our Own*, it is useful to consider where Australia is moving nationally as regards teacher education. Currently, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) has established a body, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, to undertake national accreditation, quality assurance, and monitoring of preservice teacher education courses (KPMG, 2008). In the first instance, this body developed national graduating standards for all preservice teachers, the first draft of which became available in March 2010. Requirements for preservice teacher education courses to be eligible for national accreditation are expected in late 2010 (CDU Course Advisory Group, 2010). The language used throughout the KPMG concept paper, delivered for MCEETYA, reveals a disturbing intractability within the proposed standards. Terms such as “common set of program standards” and “quality assurance of the implementation of compliance arrangements by states/territories to ensure consistency” (KPMG, 2008), suggest that accommodation of diverse needs is not a priority. It will be important that programs such as *Growing Our Own* do not become paralysed by a desire for uniformity that sees excellence in a one-size-fits-all model that ignores the richness and value of building on the diverse knowledges of Indigenous people.

Conclusion

The two-ways approach to teaching and learning with Indigenous students in the *Growing Our Own* teacher education program caused university lecturers and the steering committee to reflect on evaluation and its applicability and appropriateness for these specific students in their context. They wrestled with the tension between closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes and being able to demonstrate student achievement to the standards required of all students within the degree. An analysis of the University's assessment principles and rules provided the mandate to tailor assessments in such a way they became culturally responsive. An interesting aspect of the project has been the co-construction between lecturers and Indigenous students of appropriate evaluation strategies that they will be able to implement with Indigenous children when they are fully-fledged teachers in the classroom next year. A direct consequence of this, and probably the most significant outcome from the *Growing Our Own* project, has been the increased social capital within the communities as graduates begin to take over leadership roles within the schools. Furthermore, there has been a pleasing improvement in children's attendance at school as the ATs increasingly take over and are empowered to make Indigenous knowledge a pillar in their children's learning as well.

The *Growing Our Own* program demonstrates how Indigenous knowledge can be a key pillar of learning within a Western curriculum. Additionally, evaluation and curriculum design being customised to specific needs of students because of their remote context ensures they meet the learning outcomes of units they are completing within their preservice teaching degree without compromising standards.

Always, the sustainability of a program beyond the pilot stage is a concern. With the success of the *Growing Our Own* project, however, further funding has been secured to continue the program with CEO beyond 2010. Additionally, a similar program has now been developed in a partnership between CDU and the NT Department of Education and Training. This Remote Indigenous Teacher Education (RITE) program started in semester 1 of 2010 and the first graduates are expected at the end of 2011. It seems the model is indeed sustainable and the number of TAs able to access teacher education is increasing.

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