Implementing Indigenous Standpoint Theory: Challenges For A Tafe Trainer

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Abstract

Vocational education and training outcomes for Indigenous Australians have remained below expectations for some time. Implementation of Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) presents the opportunity to further enhance Vocational Education and Training for Indigenous people in Australia. This paper briefly discusses this theory, the concept of Indigenous knowledge and its integration to enhance Vocational Education and Training for Indigenous learners. It presents a case study on the experiences and challenges of a non-Indigenous Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teacher who has been working with Indigenous learners and communities in regional Queensland for over eight years. The paper highlights issues and challenges and identifies three binaries in integrating this theory to improve outcomes for Indigenous learners and their communities.

Introduction

Meeting the needs of diverse learner groups including Indigenous learners is a key business imperative and a fundamental requirement for all trainers and teachers in the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Indigenous learners are often required to accommodate to systems, approaches and processes designed for the mainstream students. Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) proposes that teachers and trainers integrate Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum in order to make learning and its application more relevant to Indigenous people (Foley, 2003). According to Foley (2003), one of the leading Indigenous researchers in the field, IST provides a promising pathway for Indigenous epistemology and forms the basis for Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy (ISP).

The application of IST is beginning to gain momentum in Australian education. National policy such as the Partners in a Learning Culture and its blueprints is leading the way in the VET sector. As cultural insiders, Indigenous staff are recommended as the best people to research and lead the implementation of IST (Huggins, 1991, 1998; Merton, 1999; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Smith, 1999). Relying on Indigenous staff to take major responsibility for IST in the VET sector is an issue because currently, the proportion of Indigenous staff is low (Kemmis, Thurling, Kemmis, Rushbrook and Pickergill, 2006). Initiatives under the national strategy (Partners in a Learning Culture: The way forward) are in place to increase the number of qualified Indigenous staff in the VET sector. In the meantime, sector relies mainly on non-Indigenous staff to work with Indigenous learners and their community to integrate Indigenous knowledge and make learning more meaningful for their contexts.

VET teachers and trainers gain most of their Indigenous cultural understanding from cultural awareness programs and interactions with Indigenous people and their communities. To further progress the implementation of IST and ISP, VET staff need to gain a better understanding of this theory and pedagogy. Firstly, they need to appreciate the concept of Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is most commonly known as traditional knowledge or local knowledge (Nakata, 2004) which is generated on an on-going basis by communities through periods of intimate experiences with the local environment and situations (Srinivasan, 2004). It is often unique to particular cultures and society, and is transferred from generation to generation, mostly through oral traditions (Foley, 2003). Semali and Kincheloe (1998, 3) defined Indigenous knowledge as:

> … an everyday rationalisation that rewards individuals who live in a given locality. In part, to these individuals, Indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organise that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives.

The complex nature of Indigenous knowledge was explained as being "different things in different places to different people. It is perceived as complex by most cultural outsiders because such knowledge does not easily fit into the scientific logics or western concept" (Nakata 2004, 22).

Concepts of definitions, nature, diversity, access and management, ownership and protection of Indigenous knowledge are often disparate and unfamiliar to Western notions. Terms such as local knowledge, traditional knowledge, knowledge, traditional environmental or ecological knowledge, or Indigenous technical knowledge, are often used interchangeably (Nakata 2004, 22). Their usage is mainly within certain contexts and unfamiliar to others. Therefore, one needs to understand the context to appreciate its true meaning (Nakata, 2004). Differences between Western and Indigenous notions create variance and this strengthens the case for re-contestation of Indigenous knowledge before integration into educational contexts.

It is the multifarious nature of Indigenous knowledge that makes it complex for non-locals and cultural outsiders to understand and fully appreciate its value and significance. Merton (1996) explained that those who are not socialised in the local community or have experienced the life within will find it difficult to fully comprehend Indigenous knowledge. Despite the complexities, the significance of Indigenous knowledge is widely recognised in several fields and the benefits have long been experienced in biodiversity and conservation (Hellier, Newton and Gaona, 1999), agroforestry (Walker, Sinclair and Thapa, 1995), climate change, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fisheries, and water resources (Srinivasan, 2004). The interest in these fields lies in the significance of local knowledge to address issues or problems at the local level (Nataka, 2004). According to Srinivasan (2004) its value as a powerful asset and social capital encourages ownership and incites social responsibility.

The limitations of Western scientific constructs and a non-Indigenous epistemological approach to education for Indigenous people have been acknowledged for some time (Foley, 2003). Literature about low levels of participation, retention and outcomes (e.g. Saunders, Jones, Bowman, Loveder and Brooks, 2003; Gelade and Stehlik, 2004; Kral and Falk, 2004; Miller, 2005; O'Callaghan, 2005) dominate the call for better partnerships with Indigenous people and their communities as noted in the push to integrate Indigenous knowledge in the VET curriculum.

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge – Basis for Indigenous Standpoint Theory

Integration of Indigenous knowledge exemplifies culturally pluralistic instruction (Scheel and Branch, 1993). Indigenous cultures comprise of complex sets of beliefs, values, systems, practices and traditions which form an essential part of the lives of Indigenous Australians. Often spiritual and religious aspects are intertwined, making it very difficult to decipher the composites of the cultural practices. Practices and beliefs that have been maintained by several

generations may appear to have no rationality to cultural outsiders (non-Indigenous persons or those external to particular Indigenous communities). Aspects of Indigenous culture that are protected as sacred knowledge are even harder for non-Indigenous people to access and understand. Sacred knowledge is restricted to specific groups and not accessible even to other Indigenous individuals from outside particular community groups. Many cultural values and beliefs are passed on from generation to generation through observation and modelling the elders. This type of transfer takes place only if there is the right environment and context.

Indigenous Standpoint Theory elevates Indigenous pedagogy by contextualising the content into meaningful cultural and social perspective that Indigenous learners and their communities can relate to. Henderson (1996, 86) asserted that "instructional design cannot and does not exist outside of a consideration of culture". Further to this notion of contextualisation, McLoughlin and Oliver (2000, 67) explained that "by recognising that learning is culturally and socially contextualised, the design process becomes grounded and located within the communities and individuals for whom the learning materials are intended".

This form of enculturation is a well- regarded dimension of constructivism derived from socio-cultural theories (see Vygotsky, 1978). Enculturation of knowledge with its contestation of meanings is embedded in the situated learning dimension of transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991).

McLoughlin and Oliver (2000, 61-62) drew attention to three approaches to instructional design that is weak in cultural dimensions of learning and pedagogy. These are the:

(i)   inclusive or perspective approach which imports the social, cultural and historical perspectives of minority groups, but does not challenge the dominant culture and is therefore cosmetic;

(ii)   inverted curriculum approach which attempts to design an instructional component from the minority perspective but fails to provide the learners with educationally valid experiences as it does not admit them into the mainstream culture;

(iii)   culturally unidimensional approach which excludes or denies cultural diversity and assumes that educational experiences are the same for minority as they are for others

Given these shortcomings, it becomes evident that instructional designs that disregard IST will be limited in their applications to Indigenous contexts. It is therefore not surprising that learning outcomes for Indigenous people and communities fall short of what they aspire.

Nataka (2004, 26) advocated the integration of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum arguing that "inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in educational curriculum promotes the visibility of Indigenous knowledge and helps raise self-esteem and interest in schooling. The implementation of IST therefore needs to be facilitated by ISP.

Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy

Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy is based on the integration of Indigenous knowledge into educational programs. Winslett and Phillips (2005, 731) described ISP as a pedagogy which "fundamentally acknowledges and embeds Indigenous community participation in the development and teaching of Indigenous standpoints and perspectives and is a multifaceted process".

According to Winslett and Phillips (2005), Indigenous participation leads to deliberate pedagogical decisions to encourage new meaning making from an Indigenous standpoint. Scheel and Branch (1993) contended that culturally pluralistic instruction elevates Indigenous pedagogy by contextualising the content into meaningful cultural and social perspective that Indigenous learners and their communities can relate to. In Australia, registered training organisations (RTOs) are encouraged to work together with Indigenous communities and individuals to design and deliver programs that result in outcomes for both, individuals and their communities. Research (e.g. O'Callaghan, 2005; Miller, 2005) has shown that programs developed and implemented in partnership with Indigenous people and communities result in improved outcomes and participation. Learners gain personal development, employment, qualification, opportunities for future training and employment and empowerment.

Challenges for Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy

Complexities in the nature of Indigenous knowledge present challenges, for both Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous VET staff, in accessing, translating and integrating Indigenous knowledge. The challenge for trainers is not only in accessing Indigenous knowledge, it is also, more importantly, in negotiating their contested meaning to gain contextual understanding. Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy should therefore, begin with documentation of Indigenous knowledge. This is best done with assistance from community members who are familiar with the local contexts, cultural sensitivities and language. Supporters of the insider theory advocate that to maintain purity, research for Indigenous knowledge is best left to Indigenous researchers themselves (Huggins, 1991, 1998; Smith, 1999; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Merton (1999) argued that cultural outsiders do not have the experience and "sensibility" to fully understand or

appreciate the complex nature of Indigenous groups and cultures. She explained that the engagement of Indigenous people is culturally less confronting because they are more aware of the cultural sensitivities and know how to manage these in a respectful manner.

Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy relies on a thorough understanding of Indigenous learners and communities. The implementation of ISP needs to consider particular strategies or solutions applied by Indigenous people for non-vocational training that result in employment outcomes. Validation of the role of local practice is more likely to motivate participation. Winslett and Phillips (2005) stressed the importance of understanding and negotiating the cultural interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies. Meanings and assumptions could be validated through discourses and critical reflection (Mezirow, 1999).

Cultural discourses and critical reflection are not foreign to Indigenous Australians. They engage in these on a regular basis when communities get together to share, discuss, negotiate and resolve local issues and needs. Vocational education and training staff need to follow the communication protocols of the local communities, to engage in such discourses to gain Indigenous knowledge, correctly interpret these, test any assumptions, assess the validity of beliefs, and understand their cultural rationalities. The discourses should not be about verifying beliefs but rather critically examine them to understand the frames of reference of the Indigenous people and to validate one's own beliefs. For this reason, understanding Indigenous learners and their communities and forming partnerships are fundamental steps in integrating IST.

Because of the diversity within the Australian Indigenous population, accessing, translating and integrating Indigenous knowledge is challenging for both Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous practitioners. One needs to respect that Indigenous knowledge that is sacred will remain the sole domain of the local Indigenous people. Within this context, developing and maintaining partnerships becomes even more important to make the learning experiences meaningful and result in functional outcomes for Indigenous learners and their communities. Above all, gaining trust and rapport with the communities take time and patience.

VET teachers and trainers gain most of their Indigenous cultural understanding from cultural awareness programs and interactions with Indigenous people and their communities. Cross cultural awareness training for TAFE staff provides some insights into the uniqueness and multiplicity of diversity in cultures and sub-cultures within this group and their respective communities. The training is designed to develop skills in forming, fostering and improving relationships with those from the Indigenous cultures. Topics covered in such training include Indigenous culture, pastoral care strategies, training in delivering

Indigenous studies course, racism awareness, and training and reconciliation strategies (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003). These training programs need to incorporate the philosophy behind IST and ISP.

Enhancing Vet For Indigenous Learners

While participation in VET by Indigenous people is high, their reduced retention, completion and re-enrolment in higher level qualifications are of concern (O'Callaghan, 2005). Research (e.g. Saunders et al, 2003; Gelade and Stehlik, 2004; Kral and Falk, 2004; Miller, 2005; O'Callaghan, 2005) shows that Indigenous people benefit from VET in various ways. Employment outcomes are aspired but are lower for Indigenous participants compared to non-Indigenous. The economic gain from employment aside, O'Callaghan (2005) reported that Indigenous participants (91%) experienced personal benefits such as improved self-esteem, self-confidence and workplace skills.

To improve VET for Indigenous Australians, in 2005 the former Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC) assisted the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Board develop a national VET strategy (Partners in a learning culture: The way forward). (Note: ANTA was closed in June 2005 and its functions assumed by the Commonwealth Government). During consultations with key stakeholders, areas that were most important to improve outcomes for Indigenous people were identified. To respond to those areas, the following four objectives were included in the final strategy document:

   (i)   Involvement and participation in decision making
   (ii) Participation, retention and achievement in VET
   (iii) Culturally appropriate and flexible delivery
   (iv) Links between VET, industry and employment.

Indigenous Standpoint Theory has implications for each of the four objectives. However, a review of literature on VET for Indigenous Australians shows little evidence of discourses or publications around IST in this sector. This is not to say that implementation of IST is not happening at all. Indeed, there are successful partnerships between VET providers and Indigenous communities who have made progress in improving outcomes (e.g. see O'Callghan, 2005). The exact nature and depth of IST or ISP is not reported in case examples presented in the VET literature. Certainly, the lexicon is not used in the VET literature.

On the other hand, there is much VET literature on pedagogical approaches and strategies to meet the needs of Indigenous learners and communities (e.g. Construction Training Queensland, 1997; Henry, Arnott, Brabham, Clark,

Ellis and Torres, 1999; Balatti et al, 2004). The problem with these suggested pedagogical approaches and strategies is that they are based on the assumption that the content is already sound. Kral and Falk (2004) expressed caution about such an assumption. Their research found that most training did not fit the meaning and purpose of community life. The connection between adult education, vocational education and training and employment pathways was not linked into any future processes that took account of community aims and aspirations. The assumption about sound content also questions Miller's (2005) research on aspects of learning that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations. He went on and proposed factors that need to be considered for positive and improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Miller (2005) promoted the establishment of 'true' partnerships that allow community ownership and involvement to incorporate Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values.

Mathias (1995) recognised that gathering Indigenous knowledge is not easy and suggests that it should begin with raising awareness of the value of Indigenous knowledge among locals, participating stakeholders and networks, including teachers, and policy makers. She recommended that guidelines on how Indigenous knowledge could be used be developed. Users should also be trained in the application of tools and methods for recording and using Indigenous knowledge and materials need to be packaged for different user groups (Mathias, 1995). While these steps are feasible, diversity in the Indigenous languages, cultures and sub-cultures and the respective cultural sensitivities could present barriers for VET staff. It is important to acknowledge that a combination of approaches would need to be considered for each community.

Miller (2005) also insisted on flexibility in course design, content and delivery as well as quality staff and committed advocacy from all levels. He emphasised the provision of extensive student support services and appropriate funding that allows for sustainability. Miller (2005) contended that training shaped around these factors will lead to outcomes that Indigenous Australians aspire, not just for employment but also for self-development, community development and self-determination.

Currently, most of the VET delivered to Indigenous learners and communities is by non-Indigenous teachers and trainers (cultural outsiders). They have achieved varying levels of success through informal negotiations and consultations stretching over long periods of relationship building. The case study that follows demonstrates how a VET teacher formed a partnership with Indigenous learners and their community, and implemented IST and ISP. In doing so, she also responded to Miller's (2005) factors to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Case Study

During the conceptualisation of this paper, both authors of the paper engaged in collegial discussions about the theories and principles of training for Indigenous learners, and Indigenous Standpoint Theory. Julie Woodlock, who has been working with Indigenous learners and their communities, shared her experiences. Her story continued to be refined through an iterative process of questions, reflections and elaboration on her approaches to improving VET outcomes for Indigenous learners and their community. While the implementation of IST was not a primary focus, rather forming partnerships to improve services, she recognised the significance of IST and ISP and began broadening its application.

Julie's initial experiences began with the Bwgcolman community on Palm Island, comprising a very diverse group of people from about 45 mainland tribes as well as traditional owners. Although there are certain commonalities among them, this community is in no way homogenous. Julie's first visit to the Island challenged many of her own beliefs and assumptions about the communities on the island. She quickly learned that as a cultural outsider, her formal cross-cultural training in Indigenous cultures was limited in understanding the diversity in the sub- cultures on the island. Julie soon came to realise that cross-cultural understanding was a two-way process and that much of this understanding was to come from elders in the group or those who are recognised as 'cultural teachers'. Julie approached one of the cultural teachers to become her cultural advisor.

An important lesson she learned at the beginning of her career was to "respect and wait", in Indigenous rather than non-Indigenous time. According to Hughes and More (1997), the Indigenous world is not constrained by time and space. The requirement for extra time caused tensions in meeting Julie's organisational goals that had defined timelines and resource allocations. With continued interactions with the community, Julie's first lesson (respect and wait) provided meaningful and deeper understanding about the value of negotiation, and mutual respect.

Despite a concerted and deliberate effort to understand Indigenous cultures and positions, Julie acknowledged the complexities of Indigenous cultures and a near impossibility for cultural outsiders to fully grasp the knowledge, values, beliefs and spiritual positions. She asked:

> So how do I, as a non-Indigenous person, design and deliver appropriate programs from an Indigenous standpoint? How do I access Indigenous knowledge and integrate these in the context of particular Indigenous learners and the community?

These questions made Julie realise that she too had to become a learner. She engaged in ongoing discussions to interpret and reinterpret her understandings of the needs of the Indigenous learners. In this way she re-contested the meanings that she had translated. With support and participation from Indigenous learners and community members, she jointly designed and developed new activities and strategies to meet the needs of her learners. Interestingly, she was also able to respond to factors (proposed by Miller, 2005) that underpinned the design and delivery of all the programs she managed. Julie was allocated a budget which was determined by her institution. This was calculated on the basis of services for mainstream students ignoring the cost of resources for the specific needs of Indigenous learners. She often sourced funds from community organisations to support her program activities such as cooking a kup murri or painting posters for special functions. These activities motivated learners and engaged the wider community.

Approaches to Implementing IST and ISP

Julie fostered and maintained relationships with Indigenous communities and engaged them in active participation through the Community of Advocates and Learning Partners (CALPs). It provided opportunities and welcoming spaces for Indigenous community members, and encouraged them to play an active role in restoring and building cultural capital, as well as being mentors and positive role models for the students. Julie learnt that cultural understandings in Indigenous communities originated from elders or those recognised as local cultural teachers. Local cultures, knowledge and values were integrated in the curriculum with help from elders and cultural teachers. Julie established a partnership with the community who had partial ownership of the curriculum. Local Indigenous identities were committed to the program they jointly developed. They also played an advocacy role to encourage and support the training and development of their community members. She also mentored local Indigenous tutors to assist with VET delivery so that learners could relate better to Indigenous facilitators.

Julie set up an integrated model to deliver language, literacy and numeracy to those enrolled in VET programs. The local Council, Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP), and teachers involved in the delivery (i.e. both literacy and content specialists) had input in the program. Involvement of these stakeholders informed a comprehensive and holistic approach to improving services. In April 2006, a group of tutors, teachers and student support officers set up a wikispace for the students to communicate in a virtual environment. The online site provided a snapshot of what other Indigenous learners were doing and encouraged students to communicate. The Learning Pathways program supported by the wikispace provided flexibility in design, content and delivery as well as extensive student support services from the well

trained and committed teaching staff, community members and other learners. Julie became aware of the need for services urgently needed by her learners. These services were not part of the VET provisions. For instance, she accessed support for health education. She also sought assistance to transport elders for consultations. Extensive support services (not just for learning per se) need to be openly recognised as a key to building true partnerships.

Julie managed to arrange partnerships between the communities and training as well as other service providers in the community. The community maintained some ownership of the program. Gradually, Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values were incorporated in the course through increasing participation by the elders. Over time, Julie gained their trust and respect and recontested the elders' perspectives and knowledge. This partnership enabled her to develop and tailor the curriculum which provided learners with educationally valid experiences that would admit them into mainstream employment if and when needed. She motivated the local elders and other interested community members to use their Indigenous knowledge to enhance contextualisation of VET activities for local benefits. The evaluation of strategies that were jointly developed and implemented by Julie and the Indigenous community is yet to be completed.

Julie also became aware of three binaries which broadened her understanding when creating a more culturally inclusive learning environment and developing new measures and strategies to implement IST and ISP. These were past and future; capital and loss; and cultural knowledge and vocational knowledge.

Past and future

"Look back before we move forward" was a piece of advice from one of the respected elders. What the elder meant was that the process of acknowledging and reflecting on the past highlights 'what has been." This can then be used to prepare for where one wants to head.

In the context of VET, there are issues with past outcomes and current pedagogies as well as delivery systems. Weak completion rates and poor employment outcomes were the main concerns to the local Palm Island community. So, while Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy and integration of Indigenous knowledge addressed certain learning needs, the main aspired outcome (employment) was not achieved by most. By involving the community, her VET institute and the community shared the responsibility for successful completion of learning programs. High employment outcomes still remain a problem for the community. Julie noted that involving the community, offered more opportunities for learners to feel proud and receive encouragement from their community. This enhanced self-esteem particularly in younger Indigenous learners.

Capital and loss

Vocational Education and Training has a strong agenda focusing on employment outcomes. This is a capitalist view that disadvantages many qualified Indigenous workers. With fewer opportunities being made available for Indigenous people, compared to non-Indigenous people, there is disparity in employment outcomes (see Kral and Falk, 2004; Miller, 2005). From an industry and government perspective, weak employment outcomes are perceived as a loss. The Indigenous community and Julie value the 'capital' that Indigenous people have, as a diverse race of people: a history of survival, diversity, spiritual knowledge, ancient legends, closeness of family, and connection with land. This type of capital also becomes a valued resource, and when used to contextualise VET it makes learning more meaningful for Indigenous participants and their communities. Julie believes that the VET sector can assist in the growth of such capital by providing quality staff, and committed advocacy for example by key stakeholders.

Cultural knowledge and vocational knowledge

In Julie's experience, more successful examples of integrated cultural and vocational knowledge include those that begin with providing opportunities to Australian Indigenous students to appreciate their history, cultures and identity whilst enabling the acquisition of a suite of competencies that are part of vocational education and training. She approached local elders for their input in helping young Indigenous learners appreciate their history and culture. The design of the curriculum for the Palm Island learners was culturally and socially contextualised, hence was embedded in the local context. Their local Indigenous knowledge was made more visible. According to Nakata (2004), this type of visibility increases self-esteem and interest in schooling.

To improve outcomes of VET for Indigenous learners, Julie realises that there is much more that needs to be done. She acknowledges that her understanding of Indigenous cultural knowledge, beliefs, values and rationalities will remain limited. As a cultural outsider, she is not socialised in the local community nor has experienced the local life that makes up the essentials of the local lifeworld. Julie accepts that she will be unable to fully understand the Indigenous standpoints of Palm Island and has to rely on the strength of the partnership with the community.

Conclusion

The introduction and application of Indigenous Standpoint Theory in VET offers a means to engage and collaborate with Indigenous learners and their communities. The efforts of teachers such as Julie demonstrate a start to the process of implementing IST and ISP in VET. There is much work to be done to enhance VET curriculum for Indigenous people. The implementation of IST and ISP will provide partial solution. There will be time and economic restraints. For instance, current training models are driven by fixed amounts of resources for set periods of time. More time and resources are required if Indigenous knowledge is to be recorded, recontested and integrated into VET curriculum. Teachers and trainers need professional development in understanding IST, ISP and their principles. They need to acquire skills in recording, validation and documentation of Indigenous knowledge. Once Indigenous knowledge is collected, it needs to be translated into meaningful VET outcomes, with assistance from the local community members. To support IST and ISP, there needs to be provision of learning spaces that allow restoration, respect and responsibility for better opportunities through VET. Because culture evolves on a continuum, the integration of evolving cultural knowledge, values and beliefs into curriculum design and development need to be considered.

Acknowledgement

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