

## Indigenous Australian Studies, Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy, and Student Resistance

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### Summary and Keywords

“Redressing Aboriginal disadvantage” through Indigenous education policy and studies has been on the policy agenda in Australian institutions for several decades. With notable exceptions, Indigenous studies programs have tended to position Indigenous peoples as objects of study. These objectifications still largely pivot around constructions of Indigenous cultures and peoples through deficit or essentializing discourses. The apprehension of these limiting discourses in Indigenous Australian studies for non-Indigenous learners contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of contemporary justifications for Indigenous peoples’ colonial disenfranchisement. Often, limited attention is given to examining the relationality of knowledge, people, and ideas in (neo)colonial domains and, subsequently, to the deconstruction of the epistemological conditions under which Indigenous peoples were and are “known.” The Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogical (ISP) framework was designed to develop critical tools for all students to understand the epistemic forces that empower their worldviews and behaviors. The key question for an ISP framed learning space shifts is not, “What do students need to know about Indigenous peoples and experiences?” but rather, “Where does my knowledge come from and what is its purpose and impact on the way I relate to, and form, understandings about Australian history and Indigenous Australian peoples and experiences?” In the latter approach, students are exposed to opportunities to theorize and examine structural privilege. They engage in critical self-enquiry to interrogate the conditions that impact on their interpretations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian experiences throughout history and into the 21st century. In this sense, ISP is an inherently reformative, relational, and critically reflexive framework that supports and facilitates the reintegration of Indigenous knowledge perspectives in ways that interrupt the enduring impact of the colonial narrative.

Keywords: compulsory Indigenous Australian studies, resistance to Indigenous Australian studies, pre-service teacher education, Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy, decolonizing education

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## **Terminology**

Conventions for naming First Nations' peoples in Australia vary and no singular terminology adequately represents the cultural diversity of the 500–600 Indigenous language groups in Australia. Nonetheless, this article uses the terms “Indigenous Australian” or “Aboriginal Australian” to streamline the prose and support its focus on the intersecting colonial and neocolonial spaces which implicate Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The latter term refers to all newcomers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander territories whether the arrival was over 200 years ago or in more recent generations of migration.

Codes have been used in the data discussion to distinguish the selected participant responses as follows:

- SI-#Student Interview
- SJn-#Student Journal
- TDB-# Teacher Discussion Board
- SFG Student Focus Group Interview

## **Introduction**

First Nations' peoples, wherever we are situated, hold unique perspectives on the multiple and intergenerational manifestations of colonial histories. These histories and institutions continue to envelop but have not destroyed the resilience and capacity of Aboriginal Australians as we simultaneously work to survive, flourish, and make space for our self-determination. As I write this article, I have been off-Country for three years, working on Wiradjuri Land, which sits south of the Wakka Wakka Country to which I belong. As a visitor on Wiradjuri Land, it is not my place to represent or speak on behalf of Wiradjuri people. Moreover, I cannot speak on behalf of, or for, all Wakka Wakka people.

Aboriginal nations have always been culturally diverse, and while Australia's colonial histories have impacted Aboriginal people across the continent differently, it is also critical to acknowledge our common ground, which is captured by Taiaike and Corntassel as:

[our] struggle to survive as distinct peoples on foundations constituted in their unique heritages, attachments to their homelands, and natural ways of life is what is shared by all Indigenous peoples, as well as the fact that their existence is in large part lived as determined acts of survival against colonizing states' efforts to eradicate them culturally, politically and physically. (2005, p. 597)

“Redressing Aboriginal disadvantage” through Indigenous education policy and studies has been on the policy agenda in Australian institutions for several decades. In 1961, a national scheme called the Aboriginal Advancement Department of the Union, established under the auspices of the National Union of Australian University Students, called for the

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promotion of education *for* Indigenous peoples. The scheme also recommended that non-Indigenous Australians be educated *about* the “problems” faced to encourage interest in creating measures for equal opportunity for Indigenous peoples (Roper, 1969).

In response to the needs of the time, Indigenous studies programs tended to position Indigenous peoples as objects of study and with minimal attention paid to inter-subjectivities and the deconstruction of the epistemological conditions under which Indigenous peoples were “known.” In these studies, students would mostly enter into a didactic relationship where content, focused on Indigenous peoples’ experiences, was gathered into topics such as “Stolen Generations,” Kinship, and “Dreaming.” In the absence of a relational framework, this served to reinforce essentializing and deficit discourses. Teaching *about* Indigenous people in this way relied on non-Indigenous students taking responsibility for their investment in the importance of this learning for themselves. In the decades since, educators have continued the call for compulsory Aboriginal studies in pre-service teacher education (Mooney, Halse, & Craven, 2003; Craven, 1999).

What, then, is the most appropriate pedagogical framework for compulsory Indigenous Australian Studies? Who is it for? Who should teach it? These questions can’t be answered without understanding the varied contexts and purposes of Indigenous Australian studies programs in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and students are currently engaged.

In this article, three fundamental ideas that have informed the development of the foundational Indigenous Australian studies program will be discussed. Firstly, Indigenous Australian education and Indigenous Australian studies programs still tend to pivot largely around constructions of Indigenous cultures and peoples through deficit or essentializing discourses. Secondly, through these discourses, programs are generally positioned as a medium through which non-Indigenous peoples could come to understand Indigenous peoples’ experiences with minimal attendance to examining the relationality of knowledge, people, and ideas in (neo)colonial domains. Thirdly, Indigenous Australian studies can be enhanced by integrating Indigenist and standpoint theories (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1997), and anti-colonial strategies (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006) for decolonization (Smith, 2012), in curriculum and pedagogical frameworks.

The focus of this discussion is on compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies, although I acknowledge that a range of categories exist in this field. In contrast to other categories, for example studies designed to professionalize students in a particular discipline, foundation studies have a particular goal: to engage students to develop critical tools for understanding the epistemic forces that empower their worldviews and behaviors. These studies must engage students to interrogate the conditions that impact on their interpretations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian experiences over history and into the 21st century. Through this interrogation, reflexive analysis of the intersubjective relationships between institutionalized knowledges and socialized views can be facilitated. This positions students to examine the conditions that purposefully silence Indigenous peoples’ experiences and perspectives. It acts as a tangible starting point for

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students' investment in the learning process and enables ongoing reflection and concept development throughout their pre-service teacher education, and in their professional practice, in ways that respect and value the concerns of Indigenous peoples.

The research presented here was undertaken with non-Indigenous students of a compulsory Indigenous Australian studies foundation subject for pre-service teachers in an Australian university. This first-year subject was written in 2003 and was the only program of study dedicated to teaching and learning for the discipline in education courses and the only one of its kind in the university at the time. Until 2012 its design focused on the instigation of critical intellectual enquiries that engaged students to deconstruct the conditions under which their knowledge is created, reproduced, and reinforced in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The subject employed Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy (ISP) (Phillips, 2011) to establish a critical framework through which students could come to understand the complexities of the social, cultural, and historical forces that dominate ways of knowing and relating to knowledge about Indigenous Australians in public (and often, private) spheres. The ISP framework emerged from extended and reflexive engagement of critical theory, curriculum development in Indigenous Australian studies, and ongoing reflections on my teaching practice. At a more fundamental level, the knowledge developed through culture and family/Mob was critical: these experiences generated complex understandings of my Aboriginality and my situatedness inside a colonial/neocolonial society through culture-based intellectual discourses around race and racialization, cultures, and histories.

Data were collected from 2005–2009 and comprised individual and focus group student interviews (2005 only), student journals, teacher reflections, and researcher reflections. Each cohort of students enrolled in the subject from 2003–2012, inclusive of the data collection period, were predominantly non-Indigenous, with student enrollments between 700 and 900 students for each delivery. There was variation in the teaching teams over the nine years, but the team was also predominantly non-Indigenous although always with Indigenous academic leadership. The analysis and findings of this research formed my thesis, *Resisting Contradictions* (Phillips, 2011).

The critical questions that guided the initial design of the subject aligned with those guiding the research design: the epistemological and ontological drivers for students' current understandings about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; how students authorized knowledge within these domains; and the social, cultural, and institutionalized discourses that motivated and sustained this authorization. The discussion and analysis that follows should be read as an element of a necessarily holistic framework that considers the multiple contexts for and complex intentions of Indigenous Australian studies in universities.

The purpose of the research was to explore trajectories of resistance expressed by non-Indigenous students in compulsory Indigenous Australian studies. It identified the discourses students employed to reinforce their position in relation to Indigenous peoples and Australian histories. The main interest was to identify the impact of these discourses

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on their engagement across the subject. The research questions guiding the research were:

- How do pre-service teacher education students respond to an Indigenous studies curriculum that authorizes Indigenous knowledge perspectives of Australia's colonial history and contemporary cultural frameworks in Australia?
- What discourses are used by non-Indigenous students to manage, interpret, and resist Indigenous knowledge perspectives when they actively engage and personalize their standpoint in relation to this authorization?
- What do non-Indigenous students identify as pivotal to their recognition and acknowledgement of their standpoint, and how do they articulate and manage these shifts in recognition?

The use of the term "Indigenous knowledge perspectives" is purposeful for this context. It speaks to a meta-perspective of cultural and intercultural knowledges inside and outside (neo)colonial domains. It enforces a clear distinction between traditional and contemporary Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous perspectives on Australian colonial knowledge systems, how these systems are socialized and institutionalized, and the impact on intercultural relations.

## **Colonization and Curriculum**

Just as there are commonalities to the experience of colonization for Indigenous peoples, there is a common thread of colonial privilege running through ideas relating to Australian national identity. In traditional approaches to Indigenous Australian studies, if Western knowledge systems are considered in the context of colonialism, these systems are analyzed in terms of their dominance over Indigenous peoples. This study conceptualized Indigenous Australian studies in alternative ways. It did not set out to explain theories about Western dominance or Indigenous peoples' unprivileged position inside these domains, although these concepts were relevant to the investigation. Critiques of Western epistemological dominance have been well documented (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Connell, 2007). Other studies have analyzed the effect of hegemonic forces inside educational contexts (Lea, Wegner, McRae-Williams, Chenhall, & Holmes, 2011; Matua & Swadener, 2004). There is, however, a lack of empirical data dealing specifically with non-Indigenous student responses to compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies. Cultural dominance, here, is positioned as a structural process, produced and secured by institutions but socially reinforced and reproduced by non-Indigenous peoples in stories told, family memories sustained, and the Australian values upheld through these discourses, whether intentional or not. This study establishes the potential for alternative pathways for Indigenous Australian studies that delineate responsibilities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and students in this inherently challenging teaching and learning context.

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The decolonization of this reinforcement of historical thought necessitates a disruption to what Behrendt calls “*terra nullius* psychology” (2003, p. 20). “*Terra nullius* psychology” is evident in—and fundamental to—the discursive reproduction of Australian history for contemporary knowledge construction. In this context, “our” history as Australians is reinforced as a history of “discovery and [non-Indigenous] endurance in the creation of the new” out of a vast emptiness (Lloyd, 2000, p. 32). This perspective of Australian nation-building reflexively instigates a perception of discontinuity between history and the present (Bird-Rose, 2004). It is an idealized version of the past within which the brutalities of colonialization are relegated as a mere footnote to “our” national story. This “time monologue,” as Bird-Rose (2004, p. 18) calls it, rationalizes history then collapses the past and the present to absolve settler and settler-descendent responsibility through a reliance on myths about Indigenous peoples’ absence or acquiescence to the colonization of our Countries.

*Terra nullius* reasoning also establishes a privileged place wherein non-Indigenous peoples form attachments to stories from the past—stories that are not troubled by the presence or experiences of Indigenous peoples through Australian history and in contemporary imaginings, let alone political arrangements of the nation. The imperative for Indigenous peoples to self-represent and challenge the various guises of neocolonial knowledges can be addressed through an anti-colonial stance. Anti-colonial approaches prioritize Indigenous struggles for equality and, as Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) explain, aim to “critically interpret the field, challenging dominant beliefs and the institutions and discourses that produce them, [and frame] relations within the structures of political and cultural oppression” (p. 398). Anti-colonial approaches also help make space for revitalizing Aboriginal cultural practices and epistemologies.

In curriculum development, endeavors to interpret, challenge, and reframe these relations must be scaffolded incrementally and exponentially to enable students to interrogate their own social and cultural understandings, and the partial public record of Australian histories that sustain them. Indigenist lenses are situated to privilege the worldviews and experiences of Indigenous peoples in order to “emphasise the social, historical, and political contexts which shape our experiences” (Martin, 2008) across these domains. Further, anti-colonial strategies align with processes of decolonization to create and enforce the agency of Indigenous peoples in holding dominant communities accountable (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Dei, 2008; Rigney, 2001). The decolonization of knowledge production processes is made possible through a focus toward “disruption, intervention, collectivity, hope and possibility [to] reveal the history of indigenous peoples as one of dispossession and not simply oppression” (Grande, 2008, p. 238). Thus, teaching and learning in Indigenous Australian studies cannot rely on a content-driven approach wherein students are exposed to information about the effects of colonization for Indigenous peoples, because transformative learning is dependent on how students engage with and interpret this content (Nakata, 2006). This includes how students engage or disengage with revelations of structural privilege and complicity, and overcome resistance that

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may emerge from exposure to, and recognition of, this systemic privilege in their learning.

The case-study site for this research was a single compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies within a four-year pre-service teaching degree in one Australian university. While it was not a longitudinal study, over the five years of data collection there was notable consistency in student reflections on their learning. Any extrapolation of the findings must consider place, time, institutional context, mode of study, student cohort, and the disciplinary focus of other types of Indigenous Australian studies programs.

## **Researcher Standpoint and Methodology**

My connections to all dimensions of the research site were multifaceted: I wrote the curriculum, developed the pedagogical framework, coordinated and taught in the subject, and acted as researcher. Further, my personal, cultural, and professional situations motivated the choice of research topic, and the knowledge derived across these intersecting spaces was brought to my relationship with participants as were assumptions stemming from extensive professional history in the field. Additionally, the knowledge that participants brought to the research and the effects of this on their perceptions of me as a researcher were significant. In this respect, participant and researcher ideological orientations in the research space did not just refer to the researcher/researched, teacher/student relation, but also referred to our ideas about Aboriginality and cultural differences and the distinctions therein. My positionality in, and for, the research was interpreted through a range of interconnected and intersecting dimensions that exist outside of reductive paradigms that situate researchers as holding power, and research participants as having little. The stance I held in the research and teaching/learning space was informed by my social, cultural, and interpersonal experiences as an Aboriginal woman. In particular, the collective systems of dominance reproduced a less distinct power relation for me as a researcher and that marked the research space.

Research participants responded in ways that were directly connected to me as a teacher and coordinator of the subject. The effects of this were mitigated by creating distance between participants and the various roles I held, and more critically ensuring I held a hyper-consciousness of my subjectivity and its influence across each of these contexts.

As an Aboriginal researcher and educator conducting research with non-Indigenous students in a Western space, Indigenist methodologies allowed me to engage with the research process with a consciousness of my subjectivity (Meyer, 2008). Through this conscious situatedness, I also sought to manage the effects of cultural and epistemological dominance on my subjectivities and intersubjective relations. Even so, my experiences and the shared experiences of my family, communities, and Indigenous peers have established a set of assumptions that I brought to the research and teaching contexts. As these assumptions have been tested in these interpersonal, social, and professional contexts, there was a danger that a form of certainty would skew my interpretation of the results to fit with potential bias emerging from this presumption of certainty. An additional counter-

balance was available to me as a researcher that mediated this potential and created an openness to the data: my experience of working with and learning from non-Indigenous educators and students who have shown a remarkable capacity to be reflexive learners in the space. Along with knowledge about non-Indigenous attachments to systems of dominance, the research also proceeded with a firm respect for the transformative potential for these attachments to be acknowledged and for shifts to occur.

## Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy

Teaching in any context is fundamentally an organic process of human interaction where educators hold a responsibility to moderate, recalibrate, and modify practice. The reflexive engagement of theory and practice work over time to evolve a differentiated teaching praxis that attends to key relational and conceptual themes emerging in these diverse contexts. In compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies, there is an added dimension whereby educators—Indigenous or non-Indigenous—must situate and engage deconstructions of dominating knowledge frameworks in order for learners to understand the impact of this dominance on public knowledges about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Pedagogical approaches must equip learners to become critical readers in and across public and private domains and guide them to draw distinct connections between *theories* and the chaotic yet powerful cultural and historical spheres that organize their social worlds.

The disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples' knowledges through colonization is described by Dodson (1994) as resulting from obsessive practices of the "intrusive Western gaze . . . observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality" (p. 3). This gaze is reflected in traditional approaches to Indigenous Australian studies, and in some contemporary practice in the field, where discourses of victimization and disadvantage are mobilized to teach about Indigenous peoples. In contrast, decolonizing approaches focus on restructuring institutional practices of colonial exclusion, reauthorizing Indigenous knowledge perspectives, and the deconstruction and critique of this "Western gaze." As history is a conceptual and structural field rather than lived as an actual experience by individuals today (Grande, 2008; Muecke, 2005), decolonization disrupts what Smith (1999) calls the "colonial project" (p. 20) in a necessarily nonlinear way.

These priorities influenced the initial questions that motivated the development of Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy:

1. How do the epistemological underpinnings of a person's worldview compel them to act in particular ways, and what effect does the absence of knowledge and understandings about colonial knowledge construction have in reinforcing how they know and interpret their world?



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2. How does existing knowledge influence student perceptions about what constitutes relevant knowledge or information and their choice to integrate new understandings into their personal repertoire and professional practice?

Consequently, ISP establishes a context for learners' examination of these epistemological and ontological factors to facilitate engagement with and reflection on the complex functions of knowledge in colonized spaces. The relational decolonizing framework embodied by ISP enables the space to disrupt and critique the conditions under which Indigenous Australian peoples are known and objectified. Approaches that seek to decolonize must be informed by "colonised and pre-colonised time" (Smith, 1999, p. 99). This corresponds with Indigenist approaches that privilege and authorize Indigenous peoples' knowledges, experiences, and worldview understandings of colonization within a decolonizing pedagogical framework.

Concepts of particular relevance to ISP in foundational Indigenous Australian studies are:

- Historical disenfranchisement and subsequent objectification of Indigenous peoples as "known" rather than as "knowers";
- Contemporary assumptions that apprehend historically constructed deficit and essentialist discourses to reinforce colonial ideals about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians;
- Institutionalized colonial knowledges that reproduce justifications for Indigenous peoples' disenfranchisement and that socialize and empower contemporary discourses;
- An understanding that learner resistance to shifting the structures of colonialism is a by-product of the epistemological and ontological shifts experienced in the disruption of the colonially constructed status quo.

In this sense, ISP is an inherently political, reformative, relational, and inextricably reflexive framework that also acts to facilitate the reintegration of Indigenous knowledge perspectives in ways that interrupt the enduring impact of the colonial narrative.

The central idea prompting this study into the resistance of non-Indigenous Australian students in an ISP framed program emerged from critical discussions with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, community peers, and family peers, all of which supported the evolution of a situated praxis around the nature of resistance. If considered simplistically, resistance becomes a problematic term leading to basic and narrow assumptions of aggressive apathy and argumentativeness expressed by students in a learning space. A more nuanced definition is applied in the context of this study and in the framing and interpretation of "student resistance" to Indigenous Australian studies curricula.

Resistance is conceptualized here as an artefact of reforming colonizing knowledges wherein relationships are critiqued and remade to generate space for Indigenous autonomy and self-definition. In an ISP framed learning space, students deconstruct their subject positions as a critical first stage in (re)situating their standpoint within systems of neocolonial knowledge production and reflecting on how these systems reinforce under-

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standings and taken-for-granted “truths” about colonial “settlement”/Invasion. This encourages what Hartsock (1996) describes as a “self-conscious[ness] about their assumptions” (p. 271). By creating critical subject positions for all learners in Indigenous Australian studies, students reinvest in a new space of enquiry where disturbances to dominating cultural narratives can instigate resistance.

There is an inherent vulnerability for all students in this process and subsequently resistance can manifest as a way to avoid vulnerability, as acknowledged by one of the study’s participants reflecting on their earlier responses to learning: the “lack of exposure makes you more defensive and therefore more resistant” (SI-3). This “defensiveness” arising from previous “lack of exposure” emerges at the intersection of the student’s deconstruction of their existing knowledge and “exposure” to a re-centering and authorization of Indigenous knowledge perspectives within a neo/colonial narrative.

Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy provides multiple pathways to engage students to identify and critique absences in dominant (neo)colonial narratives in relation to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. It is centered by the understanding that there is ongoing structural silencing that reproduces and reinvents the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in ways that limit access to alternative narratives. In its first phase, a process of “unlearning” is necessary—one that enables students to explore new ways of thinking about themselves in relation to Australian history, while acquiring alternative knowledge perspectives about those histories. In order to achieve this, the primary focus of compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies shifts from being “What do students need to know about Indigenous peoples and experiences?” to “Where does my knowledge come from and what is its purpose and impact on the way I relate to, and form, understandings about Australian history and Indigenous Australian peoples and experiences?” Through such questioning, a more multidimensional approach is possible, with goals that enable students to deconstruct neo/colonial discourses and to guide them—whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous—to explore and comprehend the cultural power accumulated by the exclusion of key narratives, experiences, and knowledge-perspectives of Indigenous Australian peoples in the contemporary record.

## **Who Should Teach Indigenous Australian Studies?**

All educators have a role in teaching Indigenous Australian studies; however, not all educators can teach all categories of these studies. Decisions about “who should teach Indigenous Australian studies” will always be dependent on the aims of the subject, the cohort of students, and the content of the subject. It is clear that traditional cultural knowledge, or content that is specifically developed for Indigenous Australian students, must be taught by Indigenous teachers or community educators. In discipline-specific studies for the professions in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be en-

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gaged, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators with an expertise in the discipline and knowledge about intercultural studies are key.

In foundational Indigenous Australian studies programs, especially those applying a decolonizing relational framework such as ISP, a diverse teaching team of critical and reflexive thinkers who have the capacity to deal with its inherent tensions in a measured way is essential. However, the leadership role of Indigenous academics is particularly critical to maintaining the integrity of this approach.

## **Discussion of Data**

The research identified the discourses that students deployed to reinforce subject positions in relation to Australian history and Indigenous peoples, to analyze how learners construct understandings about Self and Indigenous Other, and to identify how learners articulate pivotal moments for shifts in understanding. To reiterate, individual and focus group interviews with non-Indigenous participants took place in 2005 as they progressed through a compulsory foundation Indigenous Australian studies program. From 2006–2009 additional data were collected in the form of weekly reflective journals and end-of-semester self-evaluations that up to 130 students consented to include in the study. Tutors in the subject also consented to the use of their reflections from teaching meetings and the online teacher discussion board (2005). A researcher journal (2005–2009) also informed the study.

In this final section, data are analyzed around the study's research questions as referenced earlier. The discussion is organized around three key themes that emerged from the data: (a) the pedagogical significance of exploring culture and standpoint grounded by Indigenous knowledge perspectives; (b) the discourses of resistance used by students to reinforce taken-for-granted understandings of Indigenous Australians; and (c) pivotal moments from their learning that students reported as instigating a shift in their understandings.

## **Deconstructing Standpoint and Defining Culture**

*"This part in Indigenous studies just drove us nuts!" (SI-4)*

The overall aim of the early phases of the subject was reflection and exposition. This is a crucial element of this first phase of (un)learning given that students have strong views and taken-for-granted assumptions leading into the subject. Descriptive or explanatory content around Indigenous Australian cultures and our experiences was minimal at this stage. This enabled space for students to focus on clarifying standpoint through examining the historical trajectories of their knowledge or understandings, identifying their as-

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sumptions and knowledge gaps, and reflecting on how and why they may prioritize certain knowledges or perspectives over others.

The critical questions in Table 1 prompted students to reflexively examine multiple dimensions of their existing knowledge frameworks. This was a first step toward locating the impact of historical and contemporary public discourses on Australian-ness and ideas about Indigenous Australian peoples' cultures and histories.

Student responses to and reflections on their experiences in the early phase of learning were captured to explore the first research question:

How do pre-service teacher education students respond to an Indigenous studies curriculum that authorizes Indigenous knowledge perspectives of Australia's colonial history and contemporary cultural framework?

When asked to explain their expectations of learning in an Indigenous studies subject, students anticipated content in the form of "Aboriginal culture, song, and dance" (SI-1), "traditional, tokenistic stuff" (SI-2), and "how to teach Indigenous children" (SI-3). Popular essentializing and deficit discourses framed this objectified perception of Indigenous Australians and the presumed (dis)connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Additionally, there was a culture of discontent shrouding student expectations—this "singling out a group of people to study out of the many different groups" that students are likely to teach was deemed "unreasonable" (SJn-1). This was fostered in part by the compulsory nature of the subject and social power of these discourses in establishing limited subject positions for non-Indigenous students in relation to Indigenous Australians and Australian history.

The pathway for reflective self-enquiry (Table 1) was designed to guide students to (re)examine knowledge production and relationships. Students are supported to explicate existing ideas about "who they are" (e.g., Indigenous, non-Indigenous Australian, non-Australian, "new" Australian), the taken-for-granted social knowledge they may hold (or not hold) in relation to Indigenous Australian peoples, and the limitations of their knowledge given their social and cultural location. Student enquiry was supported by lectures, class reading, and tutorial discussions using additional stimulus material in online and in-class form.

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Table 1: Week 1 Reflective Questions

<b>Social Dimension of Standpoint (Individual)</b>	<b>Historical and Cultural Dimensions of Standpoint (Individual and Collective)</b>	<b>Relational Enquiry</b>
<b>How do you order your world?</b>	Describe your culture.	How does your culture influence your life on a daily basis?
<b>What ideas do you prioritize over others, and why?</b>	Describe the culture/s of your parents, grandparents, ancestors. Explain the similarities and differences occurring over time.	Explain how the beliefs of your family and public discourses about Australian national identity influence or reinforce your individual perceptions of your culture.
<b>How does this affect your actions in the world?</b>	Describe my culture. (Asked by Aboriginal lecturer.) Describe the culture/s of my parents, grandparents, ancestors. Explain the similarities and differences occurring over time.	Explain how the beliefs of my family and public discourses about Australian national identity influence or reinforce your perceptions of Indigenous Australians and our experiences of Australian history.
<b>Foregrounding: Power relations Knowledge gaps Connecting history to the present</b>	How does your culture influence my life on a daily basis? How does my (Aboriginal) culture influence your life on a daily basis?	Students make connections between what they see, the effect of their standpoint on what can't be seen, and the power of the visible and the invisible on their perceptions of themselves and Indigenous peoples.

Through the ISP framework, tutors were instructed to ask follow-up questions rather than offering counter-narratives to disprove statements made by student in the first phase of “unlearning.” This process of identifying knowledge gaps was critical to learning progres-

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sion over the subject. Responses to these questions varied, as one would expect. Descriptions of “Aboriginal culture” were more readily provided than descriptors of “Australian” culture. The questions about parents, grandparents, and ancestors (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian) foreground later work in the subject where students compare and analyze how specific events in Australian history impacted Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians differently. Powerful emotional responses were stirred by the seemingly ordinary questions “How does your culture influence your life on a daily basis?” and “How does your culture influence my life on a daily basis?”

Students described these investigations as “frightening,” “intimidating” (SJn-2), “scary,” and “confronting and challenging” (SJn-3) and left many “angry” and “feeling blamed for Indigenous peoples’ plight” (SJn-1). Along with an additional “fear of offending” (multiple respondents), the lack of familiarity with the concept of culture was consistently reported as a barrier to responding to the questions with confidence, as was the feeling of “being attacked when they didn’t know much about their history and self-identity” (SJn-4). These responses emanated from emotional reactions to the questions themselves rather than any explicit triggering statement, as there was no direct statement or content specific to Indigenous peoples provided in the early weeks.

One student’s reflection neatly captured the interdependence of negative expectations, emerging defensiveness, and planning to mitigate anticipated offence:

You know you’re in other lectures with people who’ve done the subject before and they said, “You know you get called an invader?” And I thought “Ooh, I’ll just get through that, whatever, and I’ll try not to feel offended . . . and maintain my composure.” (SI-2)

The potential for student defensiveness was balanced against the level of “negative opinion” held and explored in the context of knowledge gaps by this mature-age participant in an interview:

**SI-1:** I don’t understand the comments that I hear in the refectory because this is something we all need to know. If we are going to change it, you need to know. No-one is asking you to say “sorry,” at least you haven’t yet. And you’re learning about the way the media is portraying it and I guess if no-one is actually criticising anything that you’ve got to say, there is no need to get on your high horse about it; it’s just taking what actually happened and working it out for yourself.

**Interviewer:** So did you feel personally attacked at any stage?

**SI-1:** No. I suppose if I had stronger negative opinions I might have, but I mean, no. I think that there are a lot of people that sit in the tutorials going either, “I don’t know what to say” or “this is so different to everything I’ve been told and I don’t know really whether I am coming or going.”

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This student provides some insight into the ways that his peers manage the contradictions, fears, and confusion that arise when being introduced to facts hitherto unknown or underappreciated about Australian history and society. Another student was particularly aggravated by what he saw as the “hypocrisy” of his peers and the contradictions of positioning oneself using platitudes “when [racist statements] are coming out of [their] mouths and [their] actions don’t line up with what [they] say” (SI-6). The deployment of clichés such as “we are all equal,” “I treat everyone as an individual,” and “we are all one race . . . the human race” can be a powerful defense as they can simultaneously secure a position of morality and shut down further questioning.

The strategies of ISP focus enquiries on the situatedness of knowledge. As critical self-enquiry deepens, and relationships between students and their tutors become more established, students become more vocal in their responses. This phenomenon was observed frequently by teachers over the 12 years it was offered. In a first-week reflection on her fifth year of teaching the subject, a non-Indigenous teacher shared the following: “seemed like a pretty good group yesterday—some nodding happily, some sitting arms crossed, some already claiming their lives are changed.” After the third week, “out it all comes,” which “oddly . . . gets to me every single time” (TDB-1). This observation was verified by an Indigenous Australian teacher who “fell in love with [their] group in Week 1, thinking, ‘this is great.’ But by Weeks 2 and 3 I’m finding some of the students in my group quite difficult” (TDB-2).

In the focus group interview, participants discussed the challenges they felt Indigenous teachers faced. Interestingly, all four students in this focus group had Indigenous teachers. When asked to reflect on their thoughts, they agreed their teachers were “brilliant,” with one student commenting that she “[didn’t] know how she can stand up and do the class sometimes,” citing the teacher’s “self-control,” to which another student responded, “they must have done, you know, Restraint 101 . . . by the same token, she encouraged a safe environment.” There was also agreement in the group that this approach is how “you’ve got to be to get people to learn,” particularly given the “face-off” in the first few weeks where students are working through fears of giving offense and grappling with describing the foundations of culture. This is, however, part of the process, to engage students in a “safe environment” in order to express their views and be willing to engage at the level required for deeper learning (SFG).

Indigenous educators play a lead role in reorienting expectations of the space; therefore, all lectures in the first module were conducted by Aboriginal academics. In the interview, SI-2 described her early experience of this with some humor and reflection on her thought processes: “I kept looking at him last night for signs . . . someone behind me—this is interesting—said, ‘Oh, I’ve heard this one is controversial.’ I thought, ‘Great. Just great!’ . . . When the guy behind me said that, my first instinct was that [Aboriginal lecturer] was going to have a go at me.”

In contrast to interview data, individual journal entries from students not participating in interviews show that there was a marked effect of this privileging and embodiment of

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Indigenous voice. “I felt very confronted and it seemed as if [Aboriginal lecturer] believed that Aborigines could do no wrong!” (SJn-4); “I found today’s lecture very confronting. I felt like my learning experience revolved around dealing with the built-up anger aimed at us through the whole lecture” (SJn-7). There are several factors at play here. Firstly, in a large lecture situation, in the first three weeks students had no connection with academics at the podium. Secondly, an Aboriginal woman presenting questions and stimulus material that disrupted dominant perspectives of “our” Australian history and nationhood triggered powerful emotional reactions generated by pre-existing faith in limiting discourses for “knowing” Indigenous peoples. And thirdly, for many students, they had never been asked to consider culture as a concept or, significantly, as a lived experience.

While students were at times willing to concede that history had played a role in the social and cultural positioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, the belief that this history was not relevant to our social and cultural interactions in the present was prominent. Typically, as evidenced by the data and expressed in a range of ways, students assumed that a recognition and acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge perspectives would instigate a complete disconnection from the cultures and histories of non-Indigenous Australia. This persisted in the early stages of the subject even though students, generally, were not able to clearly articulate these histories and cultures, nor the connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as a consequence.

## **Alternate Ways of Knowing at the Intersections**

### **“How Come We Talk About Whiteness as If We’re All Bad?” (SJn-8)**

Over the middle phase of the subject students were introduced to content that included critical race theories, theoretical analysis on culture, and information about specific policy approaches with respect to Australian history and Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences of that history. This was scaffolded with earlier learning to guide critical analysis of the roles of institutions, such as the media and education, in sustaining colonial discourses and, consequently, cultural privilege. As students began to interrogate their meaning-making practices, they reflexively considered potential explanations for their earlier emotive responses.

Student responses to and reflections on their experiences in the early to middle phases of learning were captured to explore the second research question:

What discourses are used by non-Indigenous students to manage, interpret, and resist Indigenous knowledge perspectives when they actively engage and personalize their standpoint in relation to the authorization of alternate knowledge perspectives?

The data showed that binary thinking created a barrier to students locating a subject position—the first step to deconstructing knowledge frameworks and relationships. Furthermore, attachments to essentialist and deficit discourses that cast Indigenous Australians



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as “welfare-dependent,” “angry/aggressive,” and/or “spiritual and exotic” distanced students from recognizing and analyzing the covert mechanisms that reinforce cultural dominance, for example, early assumptions that Indigenous Australian studies programs should focus on learning about the cultures of Indigenous peoples, and not implicate dominating cultures in the enquiry. The misconception emerges from essentializing discourses that locate “culture” as exotic and observable rather than a worldview that governs how we make meaning from and sense of the world around us (Dei, 2008).

For many students, public taken-for-granted discourses are the main lens through which they come to “know” Indigenous peoples and Australian histories and politics. These are often mobilized to exaggerate and reinforce individual experiences as factual:

“But I was attacked once”, and “sometimes they ask for it, don’t they?” . . . and . . . and . . . But being well trained . . . I redirected questions back to the students: “What is that meaning as you say it?” and finally [asking] them to write down where they thought their statements came from and why they thought the question of race made them uncomfortable. I also asked them what made them desire so strongly to “defend” White practices. (TDB-1)

There is a marked and ongoing absence of public and educational discourse that addresses and describes “Australian culture” except in the symbolic sense. This absence compounds the issues arising from the mediated constructions of Aboriginality in the Western public domain. As students contended with the difficulties of naming and describing their cultural situatedness, us/them binaries were redeployed. It was common for students to deal with this complexity through the avoidance of explicit reference to and reflection on individual knowledges, and of naming and describing collective Australian culture. Instead, descriptions of Indigenous Australians framed by essentializing and deficit discourses were accessed, as they were, for the most part, normalized ways of thinking in this respect. However, when necessary, the collective of “White Australians” was called upon when negativity was assumed toward non-Indigenous Australians by “angry,” “anti-White Australian” Indigenous academics lecturing the full cohort of the subject.

The initial concerns expressed by students around their lack of understanding of concepts of culture and “race” influenced them to resist standpoint explorations. Viewpoints continued to coalesce around binaries of “us/them,” “good Aborigines/bad Aborigines,” and the idea that non-Indigenous peoples were disadvantaged in relation to Indigenous peoples. These understandings were grounded in popular myths, for example, the “government benefits” that Indigenous Australians were purported to receive (multiple respondents). There was a reversal of the disadvantaged/privileged discourse that was mobilized to reinforce existing knowledge. This was exemplified in responses to “angry,” “aggressive” Indigenous lecturers (multiple respondents) versus “smart,” “interesting” non-Indigenous lecturers (SJn-4, SJn-13, SJn-15), even though there was little to distinguish the approaches of the two groups.

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In tutorials, where there was a more direct relationship between staff and students, the responses were not as stark. Non-Indigenous tutors reported that students were comfortable making stereotypical remarks about Indigenous peoples' "special treatment" (multiple respondents) and "violence" (SJn-1) in their class discussions, whereas students in groups led by Indigenous tutors reported that it felt safer to not say anything at all to avoid being "offensive [and] saying the wrong thing" (SFG).

Throughout the learning in this second phase of data collection, while at times students demonstrated a willingness to explore theories relating to cultural privilege and race, attachment to earlier discursive framings was still evident. This was more notable when students experienced difficulty clarifying theoretical understandings about history, culture, and race to critically examine the links between their standpoint and a cultural collective.

There are two pieces of data that I will quote at length here to demonstrate the difficulties of integrating new information with personal beliefs. Both students were meticulous journal-keepers and their entries in the middle of the subject similarly engage problematizing discourses to reinforce their subject position in relation to Indigenous Australians.

**SJn-12:** I personally did not contribute to this nation's terrible history and yet I am expected to fix the problems my forebears created. I think as a country we do far more for our Indigenous Australians than we do for our non-Indigenous Australians. As a financially challenged member of this community where are my extra entitlements and welfare? Is it fair that in this generation someone with Indigenous blood gets more than I do regardless of what we as individuals have? I don't think so.

Aboriginality, here, is at the center of a problem—or the problem—defined by the student. Deficit discourses are used to reinforce socialized beliefs of Indigenous Australians as "welfare bludgers" receiving "un-earned special treatment." When taken together, this establishes a position of privilege for Indigenous Australians. Still evolving her understandings, SJn-12's non-recognition of the operation of cultural privilege and Whiteness, while highlighting her own "financial disadvantage," allows her to comfortably occupy this defensive position: for one cannot be privileged *and* disadvantaged. Even so, this student remained engaged with the readings and activities of the subject and her final journal entry was equally forthright in acknowledging the limitations of her thinking across the subject where she wrote about her inability to "completely express the horror [she] feels over her previous thoughts and attitudes."

Similarly, in the middle stage of the subject, SJn-1 apprehended the same discourses to reinforce their subject position underpinned by a fundamental assumption that social and cultural equality already exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In contrast, though, there is an assertion of "power over the Other" (Haviland, 2008) even as the student positions herself as powerless in the equation.

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**SJn-1:** It seems to me that Indigenous Australians are the same as the rest of society, in that everyone is looking for someone else to blame for their problems. What would have happened if they didn't get welfare? **If** welfare money is the reason for this problem the answer is simple. Stop welfare payments and make people work for a living (original emphasis).

Two students in separate interviews highlighted another level of difficulty for them: "We don't get the lovely adjectives . . . yours is always a rich culture and mine's never rich. There's a lot of negative stuff with dominant [culture]" (SI-1). Similarly for SI-6, "If I say, you know, 'Aboriginal,' you might say 'oh, I associate that with a long proud history.'" In this sample, deficit discourses have been replaced with the equally common essentialism. As student investigations became more layered and complex many of their revelations still pivoted around popular and familiar discourses, however students were beginning mediate their use of these.

The data explicitly showed that naming, describing, and considering the concept of culture, the nature of their cultures in particular, and processes of racialization continued to exert a powerful effect on students. While in the early weeks the most shared response to the material was that it was *confronting*, at this stage the most frequent reports were of their *confusion* as they focused more heavily on critical analysis using additional theory. The learning benefits of this progression are exponential, albeit challenging for students, given early targeted critical self-reflection that exposed covert influences on their socialized and normative understandings.

### Pivotal Shifts in Recognition and Knowledge

*"I found myself frantically searching for answers."* (SI-3)

In the final phase of the subject students were focused on the application of prior learning to the consideration of their professional standpoint and a beginning teaching philosophy. Student responses to and reflections on their experiences across the subject were captured to explore the third research question:

What do non-Indigenous students identify as pivotal to their recognition and acknowledgement of their standpoint, and how do they articulate and manage these shifts in recognition?

As learning progressed, a slow-burning recognition emerged for many students to enable reflexive analysis and the application of critical thinking tools developed through engagement with the scaffolded opportunities for self-enquiry, critical analysis, and research across the subject. When students progressed into these final phases of study, they were guided to apply this learning to a future professional context. This included conceptualizing strategies for teaching Indigenous Australian studies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that were not constructed through essentializing or deficit discourses, and for developing positive partnerships with local Indigenous communities.

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Early pivotal moments identified through the critical resituating of student understandings about Self, Australian history, and Indigenous peoples inside dominant knowledge contexts included:

- Investigation and clarification of student standpoint that allowed for the definition of key concepts and theories (e.g., “race,” racialization, culture) in the context of students’ reflexive analysis of the connections between collective knowledge systems (dominant) and their perceptions of and about Self and culture;
- Recognition that dominating knowledge systems authorized, controlled, and patrolled public narratives, naming and framing Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and histories. Critical self-enquiry facilitated an understanding of the direct impact of these often oppositional narratives on them as social actors, and potentially as teachers;
- Identification and examination of the relationship between individual and collective dimensions of their standpoint, exploring the reasons for their hitherto unquestioned objectification of Indigenous peoples, and the opportunities provided for this to occur in “safe spaces” of enquiry in an academic setting.

Students revisited earlier reflections exploring reasons for their early resistance and identifying their knowledge gaps.

To look at the way you have just viewed things was not even like taking for granted that certain things are the way they are. But when you really look at them it’s like . . . putting a magnifying glass on something. It’s, like, “wow,” that’s what it really looks like. (SI-3)

This was a typical response to reflections on early confrontation. The “magnifying glass” of the pedagogy reveals contradictions inherent to systems that regulate and mediate knowledge about Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and the relationships that stem from this knowledge.

The perplexity experienced by students in naming and explaining Australian culture was a revelation and it was identified, along with exposure to the use of the doctrine of *terra nullius* to justify colonization, as powerful points from which deeper learning emerged. For SI-7, the key to her moving beyond the emotions stirred by standpoint investigations was her taking responsibility: “for me personally, I got a lot out of going, ‘okay, yes, I do have a culture.’” For others, the realization that they “had to challenge [their] own thinking” was significant; SJn-16 identified the early confrontation he experienced as “the cornerstone to [him] breaking down the walls regarding racism, marginalisation, culture, education and inclusivity.”

For one participant, who reported that she was very resistant for the first six weeks of the subject, saying that she thought “it was a complete waste of time” (yet attended all lectures and tutorials), her view made connections between knowledge and emotions.

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It does get very confusing and the more emotionally involved you get, the more unclear it becomes. If you're ignorant to something or you don't really care . . . it's just all very simple and straightforward. You can just sort of gloss over it. But the deeper you go the more confusing it becomes.

I think for me it was at first confronting the facts that . . . I'm not sure how to put it, but confronting the fact that perhaps I was racist, and didn't even know it . . . it takes you a really long time to delve into that and try and plug into the reasons why that's the case. I was a big sayer of "I'm not racist, but . . ." I'm really tolerant of lots of different types of people and lots of different cultures, but really I'd never come into contact with people other than, or so I thought, other than people from where I was from. So for me it was confronting that part of myself that was most definitely a racist White Australian. (SI-8)

The students in this study did not progress through their learning in an orderly or consistent fashion; their learning was messy, although the combined approach of critical self-enquiry and theoretical analysis using an Indigenist approach provided moments for shifts to occur. There were also varying degrees of depth in the articulation of their viewpoints and emergent understandings. For one student in this study, no pivotal moment or shift was reported by her at all. Common across the data was students' clear understanding that the end of their studies in the subject was another starting point for further learning. And this should be an overarching goal of any foundational Indigenous studies program, especially when it is not an elective subject but a core part of the students' professional training.

## Further Research

At the time of writing, I and my colleagues had just completed the pilot delivery of a compulsory online foundation Indigenous Australian Studies subject in a regional university that adopts an ISP framework. Enrollment in this large online subject comprises students from more than 24 distinct courses in disciplines that include education, science, allied health, social work, business, humanities, equine science, veterinary science, and creative industries. Analysis of this subject will contribute further knowledge to the field with a particular consideration of online approaches and disciplinary and interdisciplinary diversity.

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