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Disrupting Western Norms and Making Space for Indigenous knowledges in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching.

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative experiences of participants in the redesigned Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching (GCULT) at an Australian University. This formal degree targeting university educators was redesigned by a small team of educators with a key focus on Indigenising the GCULT curriculum and serving as a model for program participants to do the same. Graduate Certificates of this kind have previously been found to be transformative for educators in Higher Education (Patfield et al. 2022). We utilised this platform to encourage transformation of participants to engage in these decolonial practices.

The redesign process itself drew upon Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing, through yarning, challenging western norms within the higher education system, and continual critical self-reflection. Western norms were disrupted through providing alternative forms of engagement in learning and assessment. In addition, Indigenous knowledges and perspectives were intentionally integrated throughout the curriculum to serve as a model for educators across the university.

We (two educators involved in the redesign) engaged in decolonial reflexivity throughout the redesign process and in writing this paper. Applying action research, we examined participants' reflections and feedback on the program to identify key themes related to Indigenous knowledges. The findings indicate that participants were engaging in a process of decolonising themselves and recognising ways to Indigenise the curriculum.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledges; Academic development; Ganma; Decolonial reflexivity

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Introduction

We acknowledge the Jagera, Turrbal, Yugambah people as the custodians of the land on which this Graduate Certificate and paper were developed and written.

Universities have traditionally been based on Western educational frameworks, which can result in the underrepresentation or marginalisation of diverse cultures and perspectives. In Australia, there is an increasing push for inclusivity and decolonisation within academic institutions. This incorporation of Indigenous knowledges and value systems offers Australian universities a chance to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, non-Western philosophies, and diverse cultural histories can enrich the educational experience for all. This approach is focused on creating a holistic and inclusive approach to learning that values all forms of knowledge (Nakata, 2007; Riley et al., 2024). As McMahon (2025, p.8) succinctly summarises the work of George Sefa Dai (2012 cited): “the work is not to undo Western ways of knowing, but rather to undo the hold they have on what is considered legitimate knowledge”. This paper is describing our attempt to undo the hold that Western norms have on university learning and teaching.

In redesigning and co-designing the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching (GCULT) we were doing the ‘undoing.’ The co-design process involved one Indigenous academic and three non-Indigenous academics. By utilising the transformative nature of Graduate Certificates (Patfield et al., 2022), we utilised this program to model embedding Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum and enable colleagues to do this work in their own courses and educational contexts. Typically, Graduate Certificates, along with other western centric programs, do not include Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, and to our knowledge, this is the first of its kind to fully embrace Indigenous ways in the design and the process of designing. To undo the hold of Western norms (McMahon, 2025), we (the non-Indigenous academics) needed to participate in ‘decolonial reflexivity’ (Moosavi, 2023) – a process of inward reflection and recognition of our own assumptions and biases (Riley et al., 2024) as non-Indigenous academics. The process of decolonising the curriculum required recognising the constraints, disrupting the system, and making room for alternatives (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Therefore, the focus of the redesign was to amplify Indigenous voices and ways of learning.

In the Australian context, universities often offer a Graduate Certificate degree for teaching in higher education. These degrees are usually offered internally and are not typically compulsory. They include foundational understandings of learning and teaching approaches, and curriculum design, as well as approaches to scholarship. This paper presents on the Graduate Certificate program at one Australian university. We outline our process of redesigning the GCULT, through self-reflections from the academics, the design of the program as well as feedback and reflections from recent participants in the program. The purpose of the study was to explore the impact this redesigned GCULT program had on participants (higher education educators) in relation to their engagement with Indigenous knowledges and developing understanding of approaches to

Indigenising the curriculum. We begin the paper with the authors' positionality and personal reflections.

Educator reflections

I am an Aboriginal woman (Lama Lama, Kuku Thaypan, Kuku Warra) living on Gubbi Gubbi land. My journey reflects an Indigenising educational approach, cultural identity, and confronting racial injustices. This involves confronting entrenched systems and assumptions while supporting others in doing the same. The realities of colonial structures and cultural misconceptions are not abstract concepts; they are lived experiences that intersect with my identity and my responsibility as an educator. Navigating these spaces often leaves me reflecting on how my positionality shapes the ways I am both privileged and marginalised. My white skin grants me access to spaces and conversations that may otherwise be less accessible to Indigenous colleagues with black skin. However, it also places me at the uncomfortable intersection of challenging my own internalised assumptions and addressing the assumptions made about me by others. In this space, I recognize the need for empathy and patience, with myself and with the colleagues I support. While the discomfort of fragility, whether white or my own, is unavoidable, it serves as a catalyst for growth. (Kerry)

I am a white woman of Irish and British decent. I grew up on the land of the Durambul People and currently live on Jagera Country in Australia. Growing up in Australia, I had minimal knowledge of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have lived on and cared for this Country for thousands of years. Nor did I have an accurate representation of the true history since colonisation. In the work that I do at the university, I want to be part of positive change and do what I can to privilege Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges. There is so much that we (non-Indigenous Australians) can learn from Indigenous people and their deep connection to Country. Being involved in this co-design process has been both rewarding and challenging. It is rewarding to be part of the effort to improve education and make a difference – for our colleagues and in turn for the students they teach. The challenge lies in often working in the 'crunchy spaces' - the uncomfortable spaces - of truth telling and walking the line between being part of the solution while not overstepping and inadvertently appropriating culture, leading to further colonisation. I am still on the journey, both in my professional and personal life, and I will be forever unlearning and relearning- what an amazing opportunity though! (Kelly)

Literature review

Whilst decolonisation of higher education within a global framework is not a new concept, this area of research has become increasingly visible within a broader perspective of education with growing calls (over the past 20 years) to decolonise the academy. These calls extend beyond the mere inclusion of diverse students and faculty; they emphasize the necessity of acknowledging the knowledge and perspectives of racialised and marginalised populations that have historically been disregarded. (Arday & Safia Mirza, 2018; Gopal, 2021; Hollinsworth, 2024; Le Grange, 2023).

Supporting Indigenous advancement in universities under the Indigenous Strategy (Universities Australia Indigenous strategy 2022-2025) reflects the obligations and principles outlined in Article 14 of The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations General Assembly, 2007, art. 14). Specifically, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (UNDRIP, 2007, p.13). Globally the decolonisation movement is led by student voices critiquing the “ways in which higher education practices have been informed by, and continue to perpetuate, a series of assumptions that favour particular epistemological perspectives” (Morrreira et al., 2020, p.1). In contrast, in Australia, the drive towards decolonisation in higher education seems to be significantly influenced by academics (Hollinsworth, 2024).

Indigenous and decolonising educational viewpoints have long existed alongside colonial educational models, however they are incorporated within multiculturalism and critical race theory (Bargallie & Lentin, 2022). Decolonisation is addressing and removing the dispossession of power that have historically silenced racialised and marginalised voices within our higher education system. This involves addressing the underlying power dynamics and actively working to dismantle the Eurocentric norm, which will otherwise remain unchallenged (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019; Jones, 2025; Keele manifesto, 2018; Smith et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018; Wilson, 2024). Research by Nakata et al. (2004) indicates that Australian universities persistently overlook the needs of Indigenous learners, primarily because the curricula are informed by dominant cultural perspectives. A comprehensive strategy has been issued to Australian tertiary institutions, outlining methods for the recognition and inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of understanding within the higher education sector. (Universities Australia Indigenous strategy 2022-2025)

Jetta et al. (2024, p.1) state that “Indigenous Knowledges are a set of cultural understandings, beliefs, values and practices that have been shaped through the relationships between people, nature and spirituality”. This knowledge is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic and grows as it is passed down through generations. These knowledge systems signify the ongoing process of intergenerational transmission, highlighting that this knowledge is both relevant and adaptable (McMahon, 2025). Further, ‘ways of knowing’ and understanding educational traditions of Indigenous peoples are deeply rooted in spiritual, holistic, cyclical, and relational principles. These differ significantly from mainstream educational practices, which often omit spiritual elements and treat knowledge as a series of facts to be imparted (Jetta et al., 2024).

For Indigenous knowledges to be authentically represented in higher education, collaboration is key. Academia can benefit immensely from Indigenous perspectives, which bring rich, diverse ways of knowing, connecting with the land, and understanding the world. Indeed, the Australian Universities Accord (2024) advocates for the inclusion and valuing of Indigenous knowledges in curriculum in Higher Education. To ensure this work is appropriately undertaken, it is vital that the academy and its members form meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities. Forming meaningful relationships requires respect, reciprocity, and shared authority, where Indigenous

peoples are not just contributors but active leaders in the co-creation of educational frameworks. (Battiste, 2013; Behrendt, et al., 2012; Styres et al., 2010; Australian Universities Accord, 2024).

Smith et al. (2022) issued a wero (challenge) to colleagues and management within the tertiary education sector to confront the dimensions of white fragility. The fragility exhibited by white academics can result in reluctance to engage in conversations regarding colonial histories which can lead to missed opportunities to challenge and dismantle colonial structures, allowing Eurocentrism to endure. Such frameworks dominate institutions that reflect White Australian culture; shaping values, beliefs, and historical context (Moreton-Robinson, 1999; Smith et al., 2022).

Indigenous pedagogies, rooted in connection, respect, and community, have been shown to enrich the educational experience for all. However, many non-Indigenous educators hesitate to incorporate these approaches into their teaching, due to fears of infringing on cultural boundaries or unintentionally causing harm. Concerns about cultural appropriation, misinformation, personal inadequacies, readiness, or the need for permission can deter academics from delving into Indigenous pedagogies and drawing on the insights from Indigenous knowledges (Jones, 2025). While it is essential to maintain cultural sensitivity and honour the experiences of Indigenous peoples, this hesitation underscores the pressing need for comprehensive, culturally informed training for educators and staff (Banerjee & Tedmanson, 2010; Restoule & Chaw, 2017).

The differences and incompatibilities between Western and Indigenous' knowledge systems often render attempts to superficially integrate Indigenous' content into university courses ineffective and tokenistic (Hollinsworth, 2024; Russell 2005; Synot et al., 2021). Recognising the effects of colonialism, racism and other external influences on Indigenous People, their communities, and their knowledge systems is crucial (Battiste, 2013). It is vital to understand Indigenous people have not been passive observers in society. Rather, Indigenous knowledges are vibrant and evolving and are shaped by cultural practices and traditions (Synot et al., 2021). Yet, Indigenous Peoples' knowledges within the university setting continue to occupy a contested knowledge space (Nakata, 2007; Russell 2005).

Literature (e.g. Battitse, 2002; Nakata, 2007; Smith et al., 2018) has examined the complex positioning of First Peoples' knowledge within the Western academic framework. Martin Nakata (2007) describes these intersections of diverse knowledge systems and cultures as the cultural interface. The cultural interface is "a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation" (Nakata, 2007, p.199). The cultural interface enables two or more cultures to meet, develop, intertwine, and create new ways of knowledge sharing (Nakata, 2007), indicating the Western and Indigenous knowledges are not completely incompatible after all.

Another challenge in relation to decolonising the academy is the need to decolonise ourselves (non-Indigenous people) before we can begin to do the work of decolonisation in higher education. Alfred (2004) explains that "More than anything else, colonialism is a way of thinking" (p.90), it is

“a psychological state and a pattern of thinking and a way of seeing the world and other people” that does not include the “Indigenous ways of thinking and living” (p.91). Therefore, in order to begin the work of decolonisation it is vital that we undergo a shift in perspective and ways of thinking – to unlearn what has been heavily ingrained in our worldviews and relearn alternative ways of being, doing and thinking (Moosavi, 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires a steadfast commitment to decolonising higher education, cultivating cultural competence among educators, and ensuring that Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are authentically woven into all elements of the academy including scholarship, research, and teaching. We are working within the system to change the system, to Indigenise the academy is to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of working into all these areas (Alfred, 2004; Hollinsworth, 2024). The Indigenous knowledges included in the GCULT program and in this paper represent a dynamic framework as opposed to a prescriptive model. The application of these knowledges is flexible and can be modified depending on the context. They empower individuals to change their actions and engage in informed decision-making through critical thinking and creativity. Our contribution to Indigenising the Academy, and addressing the issues and challenges mentioned above, is through the redesign of the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching to serve as a model for academics and Learning and Teaching support staff to decolonise themselves and in turn, Indigenise the spaces in which they work.

The Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching (GCULT)

The Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching (GCULT) is a postgraduate degree at one Australian university designed for educators in higher education. A recent survey on professional learning (CAULLT, 2024) revealed that 12 of the 31 Australian universities who participated in the survey offer a formal Graduate Certificate program in higher education for their staff. In 2022, the GCULT program at the focus of this paper had decreasing enrolments due to major staffing changes and the COVID-19 pandemic. A redesign was required to revitalise the program and ensure it was fit for purpose in the everchanging landscape of higher education. The process of this redesign, specifically the co-design, is explained further in the Methodology section. Here we will provide an overview of the program and the resulting design.

Graduate Certificates typically contain 4 standard university courses. In the GCULT described here the model is atypical in that the first two courses are standalone courses that sit outside the formal GCULT enrolment. These courses are Teaching for Learning (TFL) and Curriculum Design for Learning (CDL). The completion of these courses leads to a digital badge of recognition (for each course) and 10 Credit Points (CP) of Advanced Standing (per course) towards the GCULT program (if participants wish to enrol). These two courses act as prerequisites for the GCULT, in which the final 2 courses award 10 Credit Points each (for a total of 40 CP for the Graduate Certificate). The focus of this paper is on the redesign process and product of these final 2 courses within the GCULT program.

As will be discussed later in the paper, one aim of the redesign was to ensure it was more inclusive and relevant to a broader range of staff at the university. Interest in the final 2 courses by more experienced staff wishing to upskill in contemporary issues in higher education led to the creation of a Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) pathway. This pathway provided an option for staff who had previously completed professional development similar to the first two courses (TFL & CDL) and had considerable experience as an educator within higher education contexts.

The final two courses in the GCULT are offered during the trimester, as with student facing courses. However, the modules and activities in each course are asynchronous, apart from drop-in sessions hosted once a month (on average). Designed to be completed sequentially, the first course focuses on upskilling in relation to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and current contemporary issues in higher education (called Hot Topic) that are interchangeable in future offerings as the higher education landscape changes. The Hot Topics for participants included in this paper were: Embedding Indigenous Knowledges, Inclusive Practices, Assessment in the age of AI, Sustainability and a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) topic of their choosing (for example, AI and Education, or Student Wellbeing). The assessment for this course consists of reflection posts in the discussion board on each topic and commenting on colleagues' posts. There is also a short recorded oral presentation in which participants share their developing ideas for a project, which is the main focus of the second course.

In the second course, participants develop milestones for completing their project and complete a reflection at the midway point about their progress. This reflection is also peer reviewed, before a final submission that is marked by the course convener. The final assessment task consists of producing an output that shares the work of their project. This output can be any form of communication, e.g. a workshop delivery, a song, an artwork, a presentation, a report, etc. The aim of this output is to share the project beyond participants' immediate educational context and to have impact on others (within their sphere of influence). In addition, participants present a 10-minute lightning talk - either live or recorded - where they focus on the process for the project and the output (i.e. placing importance on the journey rather than the destination).

In addition to a specific Hot Topic focused on embedding Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum, throughout both courses, Indigenous knowledges and the 8 Aboriginal ways of learning (<https://www.8ways.online/>) are exemplified. For example, Indigenous colleagues are showcased for their teaching practices at the university, Indigenous researchers are regularly used as references, the learning outcomes and assessment tasks focus specifically on the incorporation of Indigenous ways of learning and using culturally safe communication. Images of artwork at the university are used in the courses, as well as shared information about yarning circles and the traditional custodians of the land, and asynchronous activities encouraging participants to share their connections to place are used as place-based pedagogies. The flexibility of the project to align with individuals' work context as well as pass/fail marking systems for all assessments is also a model for disrupting the Western norms of education. As Morreira et al. (2020, p.2) stated, "there is no one single way of implementing decolonial thought and practice in the classroom, and that this may well be recognised as a strength rather than a limitation, in that it allows for curricula and pedagogy in universities to become pluriversal and contextually situated, even where these are working with highly abstracted forms of knowledge".

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned above, during the redesign and development process of the GCULT we privileged the use of Indigenous knowledges. Reflecting on Nakata's (2007) concept of the cultural interface as a means to cultivate new understandings of the world, we integrated both Western and Indigenous knowledges throughout the design and implementation. We applied action research (Arnold & Norton, 2018) to the co-design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the redesigned program in conjunction with Indigenous methods of Yarning, Dadirri and Ganma (NIRAKN, 2013).

Yarning is a form of knowledge sharing and storytelling for Indigenous people and has been a fundamental practice among Indigenous peoples worldwide, enabling collective learning, the establishment of respectful relationships, and the preservation and dissemination of cultural knowledge through narrative traditions (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Yunkaporta, 2009).

The word, concept and spiritual practice that is Dadirri (da-did-ee) is from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region (Northern Territory, Australia). Dadirri is an inner, deep, quiet listening and a profound awareness of the deep spring of sentience that comes from within; it brings peace, understanding and increased awareness of our surroundings (Stronach & Adair, 2014; Ungunmerr, 1988; 2002).

Ganma (or knowledge sharing) is a term from the Yolŋu people of north-east Arnhem Land in Northern Territory, Australia. Ganma has many meanings, one of which is the physical place where fresh and saltwater meet and mix (Marika, 1999). For the Yolŋu people, water represents knowledge. Ganma is a metaphor for the fresh water (Indigenous Knowledge) and the salt water (Western Knowledge) combining to represent knowledge production from two different cultures (Marika, 1999). This metaphor describes these two knowledge systems flowing into a common place and becoming one, a process which creates foam. O'Donnell and Kelly (2011, p.142) clearly summarised the metaphor of the foam (citing Yunggirringa & Garngulkpuy, 2007):

Creating foam requires more than a joining of intellect and egos. In order to hear the quiet sounds of foam, one needs to listen with one's heart, to be aware of the experiencing not just the experiences and recognise the importance of process as well as outcomes. Ganma is a way to deepen understanding of who we are, what knowledge we bring, and how we can engage in respectful relationships. It requires deep listening [Daddirri].

Our approach to the redesign of the GCULT and the evaluation process draws on the metaphor of Ganma to disrupt the western norms and make space for Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing. As will be seen in this paper, the process is an important part of the decolonising work, our journeys are the focus rather than the destination.

Research Approach

We applied the IPIER model (See Figure 1) to this action research project. This model begins with Identifying the issues, followed by the planning stage. In this GCULT redesign project, a collaborative process of consultation and co-design was adopted, utilising Yarning and Dadirri methods. The co-design (planning) and implementation phases both focused on Ganma and the possibilities within the co-existence of Indigenous and Western knowledges and ways of learning. As ongoing action research, the evaluate phase utilising participant feedback sources continually informs modifications to the implementation (course content and design). This paper utilises the feedback from one year of GCULT course offerings to evaluate the implementation of the program and the transformative nature with specific regards to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and our attempts to decolonise the academy. While reflection is an element that occurs following the evaluation and informs the next IPIER cycle, reflection, particularly self-reflection and researcher reflexivity (Nilson, 2016) was a key activity throughout this co-design project and continues into the self-reflections that are presented in this paper – from the authors and the participants in the program.

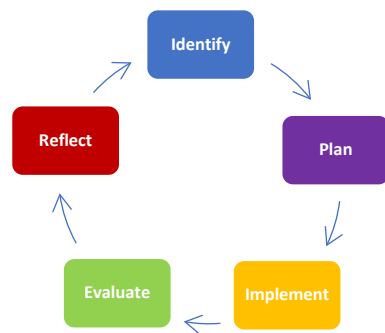


Figure 1. IPIER Cycle of Action Research (Shoecraft et al., 2024).

The aim of this study was to evaluate the potential transformative nature of the GCULT program on participants, specifically in relation to their understanding of approaches to Indigenising the curriculum.

Data Collection and Analysis

The reflections and positionality of the two authors of this paper (who were involved in the redesign) were presented earlier in this paper as an important element of the co-design process, in particular the non-Indigenous educators' journey of decolonising herself.

Participants in the first course of the program were required to write a total of five reflections related to each of the Hot Topics (Embedding Indigenous knowledges, Inclusive practices, Assessment in the age of AI, Sustainability, and an additional topic of their choice). Participants also commented and replied to each other's posts in this Discussion space. The final assessment task was to record a short 5-minute presentation explaining their developing project idea. In the second course, participants wrote milestones for their project completion, wrote, or recorded a reflection on their progress throughout the course (at the halfway point), and presented a 10-

minute lightning talk about their project output and their process towards producing this output. For the purposes of our research study, these submissions were collected from participants who consented to participate in the study (following Ethics approval from the university). A total of 8 participants provided consent for this study. Their submissions were searched for mention of Indigenous knowledges, ways of learning or related content. These sections of the submissions were included for the analysis. They were then coded by each researcher to identify key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) relating to the participants developing understanding of Indigenous knowledges and evidence of decolonising practices. The coding was compared and consensus reached for the key themes presented below.

Anonymous Student Experience of Course (SEC) surveys were also included in the data collection. These documents were scanned for content related to the embedding of Indigenous knowledges throughout the courses, in particular the specific optional question added to these surveys by the course convener: This course increased my awareness of and respect for the values and knowledges of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Peoples.

This study comprises a small participant sample and therefore there are limitations to the claims that can be made from the analysis. However, the findings presented here are indicative of the potential for transformative change for educators when Indigenous knowledges and voices are privileged in curriculum design within higher education courses. In addition, this paper serves as a documentation of a reflective and ongoing journey for the participants and the authors, and as such, is a form of decolonisation in itself.

We refer to Jetta et al.'s (2024) Big Five ideas of traditional knowledge as a framework for interrogating and reflecting on the process of the redesign by the educators, the work produced, and the feedback provided by the participants in the program. The Big Five refers to five ways of viewing knowledge within educational contexts (Jetta et al., 2024, p. 2):

1. Knowledge is holistic: Knowledge need not be compartmentalised and separate; there is overlap. Intuitive, spiritual and intellectual knowledge is all valued.
2. Knowledge is connected: Knowledge is not isolated but connected to beliefs, ancestors, community, Country and spirituality. As educators we are always accountable to these connections. We don't "own" knowledge; we carry and pass it on. Knowledge is meaningful and connected to living well.
3. Knowledge is interactive: Everyone is deemed a lifelong learner, and we are all teachers at times, also. None of us is an empty vessel to fill; we all have experiences, thoughts and ideas to contribute to our collective knowledge. Observing, practising and conversing are all useful tools for developing knowledge.
4. Knowledge is process-focused: Indigenous ways of knowing value process over outcome and consider the journey to be as significant, if not more so, as the destination. Learning should be transformative and recognise significant milestones along the way.
5. Knowledge through story: Storytelling helps us relate, connect, empathise, share and understand others. It allows humility and humanity to play a role in teaching and learning.

Because knowledge is process-focused, we begin this story at the beginning of the journey – the initial consultation process with stakeholders (the Identify phase) and the key elements of the co-design (the Plan phase).

The Process of co-design

The GCULT redesign began with a process of consultation. Several meetings with key stakeholders at the university (e.g. Deans, Learning & Teaching), previous graduates of the Graduate Certificate, and other colleagues involved in supporting learning and teaching (L&T) were conducted to determine the needs of educators at the university, and the perceived requirements for the GCULT program. One of these meetings included a colleague in the Deputy Vice Chancellor Indigenous (DVCI) office who agreed to participate in a co-design process to support the embedding of Indigenous knowledges throughout the program. The working party was formed (1 Indigenous academic – one author of this paper- and 3 non-Indigenous academics – one of which is the other author of this paper) and the process of co-design began with relationship building through yarning and Dadirri. We essentially deconstructed the existing Graduate Certificate and reconstructed it with our key goals in mind: To privilege Indigenous voices and Indigenous ways of learning; To ensure flexibility and access for a broader number of colleagues; To align the program with colleagues' existing roles and workloads and ultimately; To serve as model for colleagues to Indigenise their own curriculum and educational contexts.

As a non-Indigenous academic, this work required a process of unlearning the Western ways that are viewed as the 'norm' and relearning 'new' ways of doing education. These new ways were new to us, but of course, they are in fact 60, 000 years old and have continued to be ways of learning and teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia (Jetta et al., 2024; Russell, 2005). It was important to continually interrogate our assumptions of these Western norms as being the 'right' way or the 'only way.' In this way, we engaged in decolonial reflexivity, a term defined by Moosavi (2023, p. 139) as:

decolonial scholars drawing upon theoretical discussions about academic decolonisation to introspectively locate the inadequacies, limitations, and contradictions within our own efforts at academic decolonisation, particularly in relation to the potential for us to inadvertently perpetuate coloniality rather than dismantle it.

This decolonial reflexivity requires continual reflection and the focus on the journey rather than the destination (Moosavi, 2023).

Throughout the co-design we continued to yarn with colleagues outside the working party for input and ideas, which culminated in a plan for the redesigned program that was shared with focus groups across the university for their feedback and input. The design was further modified based on this feedback and then the process of designing the two courses began. Collaboration was also a key element of the design of the courses. Colleagues across the university (and sometimes at other universities) were invited to contribute content, reports, articles, and short videos of situated practice to the courses. Privileging of Indigenous voices was important here as we ensured Indigenous colleagues and examples of Indigenous knowledges were situated across all

areas of the courses (not just in the area focused on embedding Indigenous knowledges). For example, required reading from an Indigenous scholar in the Scholarship module, a video of an Indigenous colleague talking about sustainability from a First Peoples perspective, and video examples of scholarly outputs by Pasifika colleagues. Eventually, there were over 30 contributions to these courses from colleagues across the university (and beyond), which provided storytelling and connections to be prominent in the course design.

Findings

Participants reflections

The submissions for assessment tasks which related to Indigenous knowledges were analysed and thematically coded for evidence of participants' developing understandings of Indigenous knowledges and processes of decolonising higher education. Key themes arising from the analysis were: 1. Non-Indigenous educators' discomfort and feelings of being underprepared, 2. Shifts in perspectives and new knowledge gained or relearned, 3. Applications of new knowledge/approaches, 4. Challenges for decolonising approaches, 5. Future plans and helping others to do the work. An additional theme – collaboration and story sharing - was added to include comments and reflections that related to the benefits of these activities in the course.

Non-Indigenous educators discomfort and feelings of being underprepared.

None of the participants who gave consent to participate in the study identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. In their reflections, many of them spoke about the discomfort for themselves and others to fully know how to embed Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum without making mistakes. Whilst they recognised the need to do this work, they were concerned with how to do it the 'right way' and felt underprepared for the task. One participant mentioned their pre-service teacher education that "inadequately prepared me to be a culturally responsive teacher" (P3). Participant 3 continued stating,

There was a lack of balance between learning curriculum (which was predominantly historical and from a colonial perspective), and very little on ways of learning, how to build our knowledge in skills in this area, or how to promote a safe learning environment for all diversities.

Participant 3 continued with a critical reflection on whether their limited knowledge affected their interactions with initiatives such as Reconciliation.

Another participant (P8) whose role was leading academics in course design, mentioned that there had been a notable shift in recent years from an attitude of 'why should I' to 'how should I', indicating a willingness to engage with this content but uncertain on the most appropriate approaches. This participant also mentioned their own uncertainty in how to support the academics. Many of the participants expressed relief in the realisation that this was a shared concern, and that they weren't the only person who felt like they had limited knowledge on this topic. Participant 1 and 3 both highlighted the desire to do more, but without it being "tokenistic" (as discussed further in this section below).

Shifts in perspectives and new knowledge gained or relearned

Many of the participants mentioned they had experienced a shift in perspective during the course module or gained new knowledge. Some of these reflections indicated a process of unlearning and relearning. For example, Participant 4 stated that the module helped them “acknowledge the challenges of First Peoples” and to recognise “the importance of moving away from traditional methods of teaching (instructional or knowledge transmission) and instead moving toward alternative ways of teaching which incorporate storytelling, sharing of narratives, reflection, appreciative inquiry and then reflexivity in thinking and actions”.

Additional reflections from participants included noticing a shift towards wanting to embed Indigenous knowledges amongst colleagues (P8), recognising the intersections between Aboriginal ways of learning and traditional methods (P1) and the importance of slowing down and paying attention to our surroundings (P4). Participant 5 stated, “I admit that I did not know about the Indigenous pedagogy before now and was amazed to learn the different ways and approaches to learning from an Aboriginal perspective”. This participant continued their reflection to identify approaches that resonated with them that they would apply in the future (see Future Plans section).

Participant 2 reflected on their new knowledge and shifting perspective from their experiences having arrived in Australia 10 years ago:

[This module] has significantly changed how I understand unique teaching methods connected to Indigenous culture and education in Australia. Arriving in Australia in 2015, I initially had little awareness of its deep historical impacts. Now, I am more informed about these issues and how they can shape my teaching approach.

This participant also stated that while they always conducted an Acknowledgement to Country during classes in the first week, they hadn’t “fully grasp[ed] the depth of this practice...and now understand its importance and aim” (P2). Another shift in perspective when thinking about inclusion occurred when Participant 1 stated: “That’s it! We can’t expect people to feel included - that just hit me like a bolt. It’s not about excluding, it’s about intentional and planned inclusion.”

Applications of new knowledge/approaches

The participants reflected on how this new learning and Indigenous ways related to their existing practice. Participant 4 wrote about strength-based approaches to education stating: “So instead of trying ‘fix’ what is wrong with the students or our colleagues in our teams, build on the strengths they already have in order to give others agency to self-determine how they will make changes”. Participant 8 wrote about the relevance of community and including diverse voices in their learning and teaching practice. The participants also commented on the importance of the process, or the journey, rather than always focusing on the end product. Participants often shared examples of activities in their own practice that supported building connections with students, storytelling and focusing on setting one goal to help “slow down their thinking” (P8).

Challenges for decolonising approaches

Several challenges were mentioned by the participants, such as avoiding tokenism, having enough time in the curriculum, and challenges with finding Indigenous examples.

One of the challenges highlighted by participants was ensuring that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges was not tokenistic. Participant 3 mentioned the challenge of “weaving [literature, case studies, examples from Indigenous knowledges] into curriculum without it feeling like just a tick-and-flick activity”. Participant 1 and 7 raised the challenge of time – time to fit everything into an already crowded curriculum, e.g. “sharing stories and covering content” (P7). This comment led to a discussion on the “importance of feeling heard in sharing,” and “if sharing stories asynchronously negates the positive impact of sharing” (P1).

Participant 3 and 7 both mentioned a limited number of Indigenous scholars in specific fields and the challenges of finding Indigenous examples to add to course content. In addition, participants mentioned international students (and colleagues) who have very limited knowledge of the First Peoples in Australia and limited understanding of the value of learning about these topics.

Future Plans

The course participants mentioned several ways in which they would apply their new knowledge into future learning and teaching activity. For instance, Participant 5 reflected on their new knowledge gained (mentioned above) and wrote about future plans to “incorporate land links and community links into my teaching approach”, stating that “these methods [will] add depth and relevance to the concepts and topics discussed, as well as provide a meaningful connection to the Australian context”. Participant 4 stated that they will “work on inviting a greater degree of storytelling from my students to promote reflexivity in thinking”. Another participant said, “Moving forward, I plan to engage in reciprocal conversations and seek to understand my learners’ notion of success and collaboratively deconstruct/reconstruct our notions, to foster success” (P3). This notion of storytelling was also mentioned by Participant 2:

Looking ahead, I will consider ways to apply narrative techniques to make Australia's rich history resonate with my ... students. I am also planning a new activity for the first week that asks students to share how their cultural backgrounds have shaped them.

Collaboration and story sharing

The participants also mentioned course resources that were useful in providing new knowledge and examples of these in practice, such as the readings and the videos of situated practice from colleagues at the university that illustrated how various course learnings could be implemented into educational practices. Participant 8 stated that “what I found incredibly beneficial was the videos of real-life practices (especially those implemented at [our university])”.

The use of storytelling was a recognised strength throughout the GCULT program as well as a useful teaching strategy. For example, during the discussion posts, Participant 1 replied to a colleague, “Thanks...you've sparked something for me in your post by articulating that perfectly for me”. Participant 3 commented on a colleague’s post about encouraging their students to share

their own stories as “bring[ing] a richness to learning activity, as well as really foster[ing] a strength-based approach”.

Student Experience of Course (SEC) survey

55.6% and 60% of participants completed the SEC surveys for Course 1 and Course 2 respectively for Trimester 2, 2024. In both surveys, 100% of participants indicated that they Strongly Agreed or Agreed that ‘this course increased my awareness of and respect for the values and knowledges of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Peoples’.

Some of the qualitative comments by survey respondents related to the themes identified above. Two specific comments related to the theme of collaboration and storytelling: 1. “The engaging content and the discussions following our submissions is a great way to get all the cohort engaged and viewing each other’s work and getting new ideas for your own learning and reflecting on your learning journey”. 2. “Was good to get examples within the modules, but also from other [participants] of how the different concepts could be integrated within different teaching contexts.” Other comments related to shifts in perspectives and new knowledge theme. For example, the course was “thought provoking” and “the course design opened my eyes to what innovative teaching and learning is all about.”

One survey respondent commented that “the online asynchronous resources were carefully selected to support our learning as students as the resources were current, relevant and useful for our current teaching practices,” which indicates the potential to apply the new learning to their practice.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper and study was to explore the impact of the redesigned GCULT on the participants’ engagement with the Indigenous knowledges and content, and evaluate initial attempts to decolonise ourselves and Indigenise the curriculum. Referring back to the Big Five of Indigenous Knowledges, we can see how the transformation and learning occurred within ourselves and the participants in the GCULT program. All five concepts within the framework were evident in the writing of this paper, the redesign process and the experiences and reflections of the GCULT participants. In this discussion section, we will highlight some examples of these connections to the Big Five as means to consider the transformative learning (and unlearning) that occurred within ourselves and the participants in the program. We finish this section with a reflection on our hopes for the ongoing impacts for the participants mentioned here and their adoption of these practices moving forward.

Knowledge is holistic

The reflections from academics and participants related to discomfort and opportunities for growth relate to the knowledge is holistic concept. This holistic nature relates to the valuing of affective factors – feelings and challenges in sitting in the uncomfortable spaces for growth to occur. In addition, it is the juxtaposition of Western knowledges that have been privileged (whether consciously or not) and this ‘new’ knowledge (new for non-Indigenous participants) – understanding the intersections and the possibilities. For example, participants recognising the

overlap with their existing approaches in connecting with students, and how these approaches often included storytelling. Participants recognised that these approaches could be explicitly positioned within an Indigenous pedagogy. The project in the course was also evidence of applying a holistic approach to knowledge, with participants drawing from multiple sources of information, across disciplines and sharing ideas with each other throughout the discussions.

Knowledge is connected

Placed based pedagogies in the program as well as our positioning of ourselves within this paper and this co-design are examples of how knowledge is connected. The activities involving participants describing their connections to place invited reflection and understanding of their own connections to nature. Another example is incorporating an Acknowledgement of Country into educational practice and considering the meaning of this practice. Participants' shifts in perspective demonstrated their deepening understanding of knowledge as connected. The shifts in their beliefs about ways of learning and their connections and place in the history of this country were also transformative in nature.

Knowledge is interactive

Our own reflections and those of the participants are indicative of the lifelong learning that we are all experiencing. This lifelong learning is demonstrated through our willingness to engage in this co-design, the participants choice to enrol in the program and then openly and honestly engage in discussions together of what we know, what we do not know and what we are learning, unlearning and relearning. The application of new knowledge highlights the participants' learning and the ongoing nature of their knowledge and skill development.

Knowledge is process-focused

The GCULT program was designed to focus on process not outcomes. The critical reflections throughout, the circling back to previous content, and the final assessment task being a presentation on the process to achieve the end result are just some examples. Recognising challenges and articulating future plans also support the notion of knowledge as process-focused. The specific examples mentioned by participants on their future plans are a lovely full circle moment where we see participants' experiences in the course activities along with their new knowledge of Indigenous was of learning being fed back into their teaching contexts for the future.

Knowledge through story

The concept of knowledge through story was probably one of the strongest concepts evident throughout the course design and the participants' reflections. Stories were at the heart of the GCULT – stories from colleagues on their experiences, stories from educational practice (the good and the not so good), showcase examples from colleagues across the university, the voices of those in the redesign consultation process, conversation videos filmed at the university's yarnning circle, self-reflections and presentations, networking opportunities and strong connections made over time to provide space for sharing and understanding each other.

Adopting the Big Five Framework (Jetta et al., 2024) provided an Indigenous lens to view the findings from the participants' reflections in the GCULT program in relation to the embedding of

Indigenous knowledges. This initial review of the program shows promise for the transformative nature of the redesigned program for participants' and their empowerment to begin (or continue) the work of decolonising themselves and Indigenising the curriculum. These may be small steps, but they are in the right direction for positive change. Interrogating assumptions on Western ways of education and discovering alternative ways that privilege Indigenous knowledges for the benefit of all students is indicative of future disruptions of the academy and making space for Indigenous voices.

The redesign of this program is one example of the possibilities available to educators in higher education to engage in decolonising themselves and Indigenising the curriculum. The approaches and strategies outlined in this paper are applicable to other programs within the Australian higher education context. Similarly, these approaches can be adopted in other countries by privileging the voices of local Indigenous and marginalised communities and explicitly adopting their ways of learning and engaging in education.

Conclusions

This paper is just the beginning of the journey, this is an iterative process represented through circles as we continually revisit elements of the design, the program, and our own learning. Through our story telling and sharing of our learning journey in this redesign process, as well as analysing participants reflections, we explored the potential transformative nature of the graduate certificate to serve as a model and a tool for empowering educators to decolonise themselves and to begin the vital work of Indigenising the curriculum. This action research will continue as we continue to reflect on our own practices and continue to learn (and unlearn) – through ongoing engagement with Indigenous knowledges and the shared learning from participants enrolled in the program. As Moosavi (2023, p.139) eloquently stated, “Decolonial reflexivity will also ensure that decolonial efforts do not stagnate into mundane routines by way of ensuring that there is a continual refreshing of efforts to decolonise in the spirit of recognising that decoloniality is a journey and not a destination”. As part of our continued journey in Indigenising the curriculum and engaging in decolonial reflexivity, we have provided, in this paper, a small insight into the potential for Indigenising the curriculum and the possibilities when we view this approach as Ganma – the co-existence of Indigenous and Western knowledges and multiple ways of learning that benefit all people in the Academy.

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