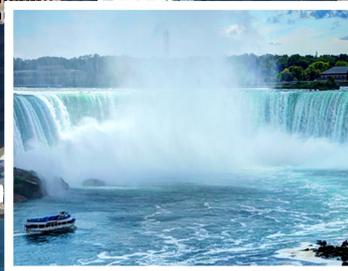
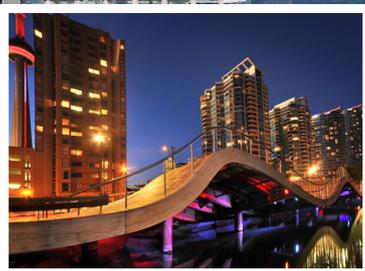




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# Decolonising Knowledge Work in Teacher Education

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## Abstract

*This paper comes from doctoral research focusing on the low number of young Aboriginal teachers currently undertaking and completing teacher education in remote communities in central Australia. The premise of this research was that by listening to the stories of a group of fully qualified and experienced Aboriginal teachers from these communities we might better understand the complex array of barriers, as well as supports, that Aboriginal people from remote communities encounter when they undertake to become qualified. What became clear from the research was that the biggest barrier to Aboriginal people becoming qualified teachers is the legacy of settler colonialism and the ongoing neo-colonial structures of education and knowledge systems. What also emerged is that there are powerful possibilities for co-creation of knowledge if we are willing to engage in a process of decolonising the knowledge work we do.*

## 1. Introduction

While at one time there were numerous teacher education programs in central Australia aimed specifically at supporting Aboriginal teachers from remote communities to undertake teacher education, the current situation is very different. There are now very few Aboriginal teachers from remote communities completing their full teacher qualification. A doctoral study [1] sought to find reasons why this was the case. Through the examination of seven teacher narratives from fully qualified Aboriginal teachers from these communities a clear pattern of barriers and support were revealed. The stories revealed constant and consistent barriers for Aboriginal teachers in the form of the legacy of colonisation in Australia and the continuing neo-colonial ideology that is firmly embedded in our educational systems. The stories also revealed the possibility of working intentionally in a decolonising way. In the spaces where the Aboriginal teachers had been able to work in this way throughout their learning journey, the positive and generative possibilities were clear and exciting. The culmination of this work was the proposal of a framework for doing decolonising work that both

hold a mirror up to the embedded and damaging colonial ideologies, but also offers a different way of doing knowledge work together.

## 2. Literature review

The pathway into teacher education has proven a particularly difficult one for first language speaking Aboriginal adults from remote communities in Australia to pursue. Those who have succeeded have often done so in spite of the educational system they are working in rather than being supported by it. However, as acknowledged by so much research, Aboriginal teachers from within remote communities are uniquely placed to understand children's early experiences and provide continuity in their education because they share ontological and epistemological knowledge and understandings with the children from their communities [2] [3] [4]. This enables these teachers to undertake the work of a teacher 'without engaging in imposition' [5]. The imposition Dewey is referring to is the imposition of one way of knowing at the expense of another. The deep ontological differences that Aboriginal teachers have experienced in their own navigation of the educational system also exist for the children in their home communities. The shared ontological identity between these teachers and their students and the shared language, culture and practices that embody that identity provides these teachers with unique insights about how best to teach students from their home communities.

Why is it then that there remain so few qualified Aboriginal teachers working in remote schools, or for that matter in any schools? In a major five-year project recently conducted in Australia entitled the 'More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative' (MATSITI) it was reported that:

*Although the need to increase the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers has been highlighted for many years, little has changed nationally since the 1980s when Hughes and Wilmot (1982) called for 1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990 [6].*

This is a point that is repeatedly highlighted in research done in the Australian teacher education space the early to mid-2000s (Herbert 2002; Reid et al. 2004). The purpose of this research was to explore exactly this issue in the context of the central Australian region of the Northern Territory, Australia. This area is geographically located around the hub town of Alice Springs. The teachers involved in this study come from the communities of Ntaria, Yuendumu, Papunya, Utju (Areyonga) and Nyirripi.



Figure 1. Remote communities in central Australia [7]

### 3. Methods and Methodology

This study wanted to begin with the idea of success. Indigenous teachers from remote communities in Central Australia have been successful in completing their teacher education in the past. The research design and methodology were built around the intention and desire to decolonise the knowledge processes involved in research. The participants for this research were chosen using purposive sampling [8] based on the following criteria: 1) Indigenous, 2) fully qualified classroom teacher having completed a four-year Bachelor of Education/Teaching, and 3) from a remote community geographically located in central Australia. There were seven participants who had their narratives recorded. This falls within the commonly recommended number in studies of this kind [9]. In reality the number and nature of participants was determined by the limited number of fully qualified Aboriginal teachers located in remote communities in central Australia.

A narrative methodology was chosen because of its compatibility with Indigenous knowledge systems [10] [11] [12]. The teacher narratives were gathered using un-structured/semi-structured narrative interviews [9] which more closely resemble a 'yarning' approach [13]. The recording of the narratives was preceded by a long conversational phase giving each participant the time to fully

consider their participation in the research and to be in control of when and where the 'telling' would commence. The story telling focused on the whole of career experience of each teacher. Each narrative was recorded over a number of sessions and produced a detailed, in depth, rich account of the experience of becoming and being a teacher. The language of telling was left up to the participant and translation was used where required and often undertaken by the multilingual participants themselves.

The participants were also involved in the analysis work. All teacher participants and the researcher came together to analyse the full set of narratives. This helped to overcome issues of language and cross-cultural understanding as participants had this additional opportunity to clarify their meaning and unpack any metaphors and symbolism used [14]. This was a crucial way of ensuring that important themes in the narratives were not identified solely by one non-Indigenous person. The experiences of these teachers were grouped into seven themes: 'feeling for family', 'learning with marlpa', 'mentoring, support and encouragement', 'team teaching', 'leadership', 'exclusion and power', 'looking at us level'. Through these thematic groupings the teachers' voices clearly articulate both the elements that supported them in their success and the elements that presented barriers.

### 4. Analysis of Findings

In order to better understand the supports and barriers that underpinned the career and learning journeys of the teacher participants in this doctoral research it was necessary to explore the seven themes through some theoretical and philosophical lenses.

The barriers and challenges that emerged from the narratives of the teachers were examined against the backdrop of colonisation in Australia. The specific theories of Whiteness Theory, Critical Race Theory and the theory of colonial mimicry were used to peel back the layers of barriers experienced, as articulated in the narratives, to show the underlying ideologies at play in the context of remote Indigenous teacher education. This analysis showed that inequality played out at a three levels within the system. Firstly, due to the colonial default position within the Australian education system, Indigenous teachers were consistently treated as less equal than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Despite meeting all of the requirements for becoming 'qualified' teachers, the teacher participants consistently felt themselves held at arm's length, and were treated as 'white but not quite' as explained by Bhabha's [15] theory of colonial mimicry. Secondly, educational systems have developed ways of attributing higher status to White/Western knowledge than it does to Indigenous

knowledge systems. The Indigenous teachers, as holders of Indigenous knowledge, were subsequently also relegated to a lower status within their schools. Finally, the teacher narratives revealed many examples of mechanisms of systemic Whiteness [16] at work in the experience of the teachers. These ‘tools of whiteness’ were experienced in various forms through leadership styles, culturally biased discourses around conceptions of ‘quality’ and through interpersonal dysconscious racism [17].

The teacher narratives also revealed significant insights into those professional behaviours and programs that supported success in becoming a qualified teacher. What became clear was the central importance of Indigenous teacher education being engaged and embedded in the local context of the teachers’ respective communities. The era of community based teacher education provided important mechanisms for the local community and families to engage in what the teacher education programs were doing. The cohort model of this approach provided crucial support among students and a feeling of cultural safety. These delivery models also provided flexibility and invited opportunities for two-way learning. These models were generative in nature and co-created knowledge grew out of them, rather than the current model of teacher education which offers a one-size fits all standardized and imposed approach.

Based on these findings, as the teacher education system currently stands, it would be an act of irresponsibility to encourage young people from remote Aboriginal communities to pursue a teacher education pathway. To do so would expose them to a form of doubled violence [18], such is the neo-colonial imperative of the current standardized system. It allows no room for difference. However, the culmination of this research was to propose a framework for decolonising knowledge work, with the belief that supporting the creation of this kind of knowledge space at all levels of remote Aboriginal education, including teacher education, would provide the foundation for a new generation of young Aboriginal teachers from remote communities to successfully, effectively and meaningfully engage in teacher education pathways.

## 5. Discussion

The following is a framework for doing decolonising knowledge work, which could be constructive for teacher education. This framework is proposed with the view that it needs to be inhabited and used at many levels of the educational systems – interpersonal, classroom, leadership, community, departmental and faculty. It consists of the following *ways* of coming together in ‘good faith’ [19] and *tools* for decolonising knowledge work.

### 5.1. Four Ways of coming together in ‘good faith’

#### 5.1.1. Decolonising knowledge work is relational.

In order to work together in ‘good faith’ in a decolonising way, we must prioritise relationships. Martin [11] talks about the levels of relationship that people can enter into – being unknown, being known about and being known. She states that ‘To remain ‘unknown’ is a personal decision and regarded as a temporary state of relatedness’. It is possible to see many examples where people working in intercultural spaces have chosen to remain ‘unknown’ to each other. However good decolonising knowledge work requires us to engage in a process of ‘coming alongside’ which Martin [11] suggests ‘occurs as relatedness is expanded, strengthened and deepened from that of being known about to being known’. Many others have talked about the centrality of relationships and relatedness [12] [20] [21] [22] [23].

Rose [18] asserts that relationships are crucial because it is through these relationships among people and between people and place that alternatives to the ways we have done things in the past can arise. We need these relationships to derive from a new sense of ethics, an ‘ethic of connection’, where we see ourselves as ‘mutually implicated humans whose primary duty is to respond to the calls of others’ [18]. Rose calls this an ethics of responsibility not guilt, an ethic that ‘demarcates a path towards decolonization...towards a human condition of living with and for others’ [18]. Decolonising knowledge work requires us to be relational in ways that are mutually vulnerable and responsive.

#### 5.1.2. Decolonising knowledge work allows time.

Parker Palmer [24] suggests that allowing time as part of the process is ‘the work before the work’. He connects this idea strongly to the idea of working relationally. In Palmer’s understanding the work before the work is about taking time to come to terms with and understand our inner landscape, honestly, so that we enter into the process of doing the work in front of us relatively unencumbered. We are then able to enter into a ‘live encounter’ with each other that permits the work that emerges to be trustworthy and ‘true’ from the perspective of the participants. By paying attention to this ‘work before the work’ we ensure that when we actually sit down to do the ‘work’ the experience is good for all who are involved, and the feeling we are all left with at the conclusion is ‘right’, embodying a deep mutual respect for our differences. In decolonising knowledge work this is important because of our radically different ontological and epistemological understandings of time. Carnes [25] explains that non-Indigenous Australians are tuned to a linear

notion of time that belongs to the positivist ideology of the dominant Western paradigm. Rose [18] sees dealing with notions of time as crucial in the work of decolonisation. She asserts that in Western concepts of time 'life is at war with death' [18] which in turn creates an obsession with future orientation: everything in our lives is directed towards the creation of a more perfect future and on this basis disrespect for human or other suffering is justified or ignored [18].

This contrasts strongly with notions of time reflected in Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies regarding time. Miriam Rose Ungenmerr highlights the importance of 'Dadirri' which she explains is 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness - something like what you call contemplation' [26]. Miriam Rose Ungenmerr also explains in relation to time that, 'Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course - like the seasons...We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and meetings. The right people must be present. Careful preparations must be made. We don't mind waiting because we want things to be done with care' [27]. Buker [28] talks of the importance of allowing time for the repetitive and often seasonal sharing of knowledge through stories. Allowing time, combined with building relationships, helps to both mitigate the chances of conflict arising but also provide a solid foundation upon which to resolve conflict.

This will be challenging to those from a Western paradigm with its focus on outcomes, destination, action and quantification [25] who are used to taking for granted Western privilege and authority [29]. But it is an important and necessary part of doing decolonising knowledge work. Rose [18] suggests that the focus should instead be on the 'possibilities of our present moment' [18], allowing time in the present moment which will teach us all new and generative ways of working together.

### **5.1.3. Decolonising knowledge work is engaged in the local context and embedded in experience.**

Successful and supportive work for the teachers in this study happened when the programs were culturally embedded and contextualised. Many theorists who come from a Critical Race perspective argue that an insistence on context and lived experience provides a defense against the 'colourblind and sanitized analyses generated via universalistic discourses' [30]. This view is shared by post-colonial and collectivist theorists. Law and Lin [31] suggest that the benefit of contextualizing and grounding things in experiences is that 'large issues can be detected in specific practices...the whole can be found within...if we examine these in the right way then large post-colonial knowledge predicaments can be found at work within specific

interactions'. The more embedded in the local something is the more we avoid slipping into thinking there is a 'grand narrative' [18] [19].

Locating learning in a context that has meaning for participants allows people to draw on the significant knowledge resources of families, culture and land. This approach offers an invitation for the learning to happen collectively and means that a deep level of family and community support could be built up as well as embedded in understandings of what education and teacher education means for people in each context.

### **5.1.4. Decolonising knowledge work welcomes difference.**

Difference needs to be central and embraced in the decolonising work we do together. Western ways of thinking and knowing, which are 'dominated by a matrix of hierarchical oppositions' [18], have not traditionally coped well with the multiplicity of possibilities that difference allows. They are deeply disconcerted by the notion of 'pluralism and diversity in language, culture and location' [32] and much more comfortable with the formation of dualities 'man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, active/passive, civilisation/savagery' [18] which inevitably leads to the duality of dominant and other. Verran [19] talks of how in 'explaining the other in terms of itself, each actually explains the other away'. As a result of these kinds of Western knowledge practices we now have a state where 'not all positioned perspectives are equally valued, equally heard, or equally included...some positions have historically been oppressed, distorted, ignored, silenced, destroyed, appropriated, commodified, and marginalised' [33].

Decolonising knowledge work requires us not only to acknowledge difference but to welcome it and the generative possibilities it offers [19]. To grasp these generative possibilities Verran counsels us that we need to be willing to go 'deeper inside' the experience of difference before the point of coming to general concepts [19]. If we move too quickly to impose our own epistemic categories on each other then we are continuing the neo-colonial project. We must learn ways to resist and counteract this instinct. Verran [19] suggests that people need find ways to '...simultaneously maintain and dissolve difference, in ways that are authentic and generative in terms of their own disparate knowledge practices...(and) enable the negotiation of useful links that can go along with maintaining significant divisions'. A space that welcomes difference is not a space of binaries or hierarchies, but instead is a space of hybridities [34] and of heteroglossic narratives where there is discursive space for conflicting arguments [18]. Blair [35] reminds us that engaging with the 'in-between space' is both challenging and exciting. We need to find ways for different knowledge systems to co-exist, without one seeking

to erase the other, leading to generative learnings and new knowledge. This kind of transformational work must be the agenda of decolonising knowledge work.

## 5.2. Three tools for decolonising knowledge work

In addition to these *ways of being* we require some *ways of doing* the work.

**5.2.1. Cultivating disconcertment.** Cultivation of disconcertment is crucial to decolonising knowledge work because it is a way of interrupting whiteness and dysconscious racism. So many of the barriers experienced by the teacher participants in this research were directly related to the ongoing and neo-colonial experience of modern Australia. We need to find mechanisms for interrupting these deeply embedded ideological and culturally exclusive ways that dominate the educational experience. Teaching people to pay attention to and dwell in their own disconcertment is one such mechanism.

We must learn to cultivate our own disconcertment in the process of listening. Verran [19] explains this disconcertment as ‘a type of experience that alerts us to the tensions of the relations that exist within what we ‘feel’ as epistemic rightness, something which we are generally unaware of, until that is, it is rent asunder’. Learning to pay attention to moments of ‘disconcertment’ as they arise are ways of staying grounded in the present and learning to live with the discomfort of difference. Verran [19] suggests that the bodily tension we feel when we experience epistemic difference points to the ‘vast inertia of the mesh of institutions, categories, arranged materials, and communicative protocols and processes, which is knowledge’. When our taken for granted ways of knowing are disrupted or challenged by an alternate way of knowing our instinct is self-protection through the invocation of and insistence upon our own single admissible meaning [19]. Rose [18] calls this a ‘narcissistic singularity’ and maintains that we need to find ways of unmaking this if we want to work towards decolonization. Epistemic disconcertment is crucial for doing decolonising knowledge work. To ‘sensitize’ and ‘cultivate’ our disconcertment Verran [19] suggests the need for ‘interrupting tools’. The interrupting tools being proposed here are those of story and dialogue.

**5.2.2. Story.** Stories must be the main tool of doing decolonising knowledge work. This is because they bring together the four ways of working together in ‘good faith’. Firstly, stories are a way of us ‘becoming known’ to each other [11] or becoming ethically entangled [18]. To bear witness to someone’s story we discover a mode of responding

to that person that ‘exceeds an epistemological determination and becomes ethical involvement’ [18]. It upsets our previous notions of who that person was and helps us to come into a deeper knowledge and understanding of that person. Stories are relational.

Secondly, stories allow time for deep listening to each other. The time allowed for the telling is determined by the teller and they can choose the structure. In a context involving Indigenous tellers this means that there is time to tell the story from a place of cultural safety and respect [11], and in a circular way using thematic repetition, as opposed to the step-by-step, linear progression of a Western structure [36]. Using story means the teller remains in control of allowing as much time as is necessary for the full telling and the role of others is to ‘listen with attentiveness’ [18]. Stories allow time for coming together in ‘good faith’.

Thirdly, stories are personal, based in the local context of the teller and based on experience. Stories or first person accounts are a way of naming one’s own reality in your own ‘voice’ [37] and is grounded in the local and the present. The story might be about past experience but it unfolds in the present moment in the act of telling. Story and experience allows identity and epistemological understandings to be centrally present in learning because our stories are shaped by how we know and who we are. Rose [18] talks about the importance of the ‘web of stories we are able to weave out of our historically grounded experiences’, which help us to explore the ‘local possibilities that illuminate alternatives’. In this way stories are ways of coming together in ‘good faith’ that generate new knowledge between us.

Finally, stories make space for difference. It is in the very nature of stories to allow for difference. There is not only one meaning to any story. The teller’s intention is filtered through their own experiential knowledge, but so too is the listener’s understanding. A multiplicity of meanings is possible in any story. Hokari [38] suggests that it is not about finding a ‘right’ story but widening the possibilities of stories. Variation can provide us with a bundle of possibilities without judgment and different stories will often contradict each but can coexist. Stories offer us a way of coming together in ‘good faith’ that invite difference and invite us as listeners and tellers to become comfortable with that difference.

**5.2.3. Dialogue.** The point of decolonizing knowledge work is to find generative ways of doing difference. With this in mind, based around our moments of epistemic panic and disconcertment we need to commit to a process of ‘mutual interrogation, which can reveal ‘our’ traditions to ourselves, as much as to the other’ [19]. We need to use mechanisms for ‘finding a way to go on by staying in the feeling of disconcertment...staying with that

moment of existential panic rather than trying to categorize and label things according to our own epistemological understandings and knowledge' [19].

Dialogue invites a multiplicity of ideas, makes space for differences in understanding and enables a particular sort of metaphysical engagement where the gaps between categories open up the possibilities of the emergence of new ways of going on together that may have been previously unimagined. Dialogue gives us opportunities to deepen our 'knowing about' and 'being known' by others [11]. It provides people with a chance to talk back on their own terms [18] and requires a non-judgmental space [11]. Rose [18] proposes that dialogue is an ethical alternative to the monologue that too often dominates our ways of being and doing. Rose and Ford [39] also remind us that ethical dialogue requires that we acknowledge and understand our particular and harshly situated presence. This is particularly important given the violence that monologue has wrought on Indigenous people in the past, and continues to do so. It is for this reason that we must find new ways of coming together in 'good faith' and tools such as dialogue that can work across chasms of radical harm. This is the purpose of committing to a space of decolonising knowledge Work.

## 6. Conclusion

If we wish to create effective and meaningful pathways for people from remote communities into teacher education, then we must find ways to do so that do not continue the doubled violence of colonialism and neo-colonialism. We have to find ways of identifying and calling out the assimilationist practices still embedded in our policies, curricula and institutional behaviours, through listening to the stories of those who experience the impact of this assimilatory intent first hand. We need to be honest about the fact that our educational systems, including schools and the courses that prepare people to work in schools, operate within structures of cultural and social reproduction that have embedded in them deep levels of hegemonic ideology. We also need to understand that many of the people who work in schools do not critique the hegemonic ideology that undergirds the structure of our educational systems. It is not enough to focus on just the teacher education of Indigenous teachers. There is also a need for non-Indigenous teachers to be better prepared to work alongside Indigenous teachers and within Indigenous communities.

To respond to this reality, we need to intentionally move all teacher education into a decolonising knowledge space where there can be genuine dialogue and new knowledge building between people from diverse knowledge traditions

with a view to finding generative ways of doing difference-work together. This is an optimistic and aspirational stance that assumes that violence and damage are not the only things we are capable of [18]. It requires of us the commitment to finding new ways of coming together in 'good faith' based on a commitment to building relationships, allowing time, grounding our work in the local and experiential and welcoming difference. It is in this kind of knowledge space that young Aboriginal people from remote communities can effectively, safely and meaningfully engage in a teacher education pathway.

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