

## **Transformative learning in first year Indigenous Australian studies: Posing problems, asking questions and achieving change. A Practice Report**

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### **Abstract**

*Indigenous Australian studies necessarily addresses emotionally-difficult topics related to race, history, colonialism and our identities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As educators in this discipline, it is important for us to find teaching and learning approaches which make space for these topics to be accessed, understood, discussed and engaged with in meaningful ways. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), because of its emphasis on dialogic learning, is a pedagogical tool used in many Indigenous Australian studies classrooms in preference to other methods. In this presentation we explore the potential of PBL to allow personal and emotional responses to become accessible, dialogic and discursive, so that the resulting new awareness translates into practical action and change. We focus on a practice-based initiative which involves the implementation of PBL in a first year introductory course at The University of Queensland and provide practical guidance on the incorporation of PBL in curriculum development.*

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## **Description of the course**

The first year course that was focused on in this Nuts and Bolts presentation is called “Indigenous Australian Issues: Past, Present, Future” at The University of Queensland. It is a multidisciplinary course drawing extensively upon Indigenous Australian (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) history and culture to provide insight into contemporary Australian issues. As well as providing a series of lectures from an academic viewpoint, the course is supported by Problem-Based Learning (PBL) packages and draws upon the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from a diverse range of backgrounds. This provides students with a unique perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experience as well as the broader human experience in Australia. Students are expected to engage critically with key issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. The course aims to provide students with the necessary academic skills to establish a balanced understanding of the cross-cultural dimensions of the issues and perspectives relevant to Indigenous Australians. Teaching staff actively draw upon visiting scholars to give students ample opportunity to engage with the experiences of Indigenous People in contemporary Australian society and popular culture. The learning objectives of this first year course are quite explicit in terms of the critical engagement, dialogue and reflection expected of students:

1. Engage with knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and identity.
2. Understand the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and identity have been constructed throughout colonisation.
3. Understand the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are researching back, articulating their own histories, cultures and identities.
4. Engage in dialogue regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and how these issues fit in the contemporary contexts at individual and whole social movement levels.
5. Engage with introductory skills in critical analysis, and how these can be employed to reveal the power relations implicit in colonial discourse.
6. Engage in an introduction to conceptions of social healing and relational responsibility.

Typically this course has an enrolment number of approximately 120 first year students drawn from a wide variety of disciplines including arts, education, journalism and engineering and it is a popular course with incoming international exchange students. The course is also a compulsory introductory course for first year social work students at The University of Queensland. “Indigenous Australian Issues” is the core foundation course for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies major within the Bachelor of Arts at The University of Queensland and it delivers the core principles and understandings relevant to this discipline.

## **What the PBL package looks like**

In its broadest sense, PBL can be defined as a “method of learning in which the learners first encounter a problem, followed by a systematic, student centred enquiry process” (Schwartz, Mennin & Webb, 2001, p. 2). PBL as we know it today was first implemented in health science and medical education curricula in Canada in the late 1960s (Boud & Felletti, 1997; Schwartz et al., p. 2) and is commonly used in the course content of natural sciences (e.g., engineering, mathematics) and professional degrees (e.g., business, law, social work,

education). The PBL approach developed out of research that demonstrates that adult learners understand material better and retain it for longer if they engage with it actively. Described by Savin-Baden (2000) as a “student centred” approach to pedagogy, she explains that PBL offers students opportunities to “explore a wide range of information, to link the learning with their own needs as learners and to develop independence in enquiry” (p. 3).

Relationships and dialogue are key features of PBL. Students work in small groups with a lecturer or a tutor who acts as a facilitator of discussions and learning (Schwartz et al., 2001, p. 2). In many ways, PBL group work enables the class to build a “community” of learners, joined by a shared commitment and desire to “know,” which hooks maintains is essential to create a climate where openness, intellectual rigor and personal transformation can happen (hooks, 1994, p. 40). There are no “right” answers in PBL, rather this approach seeks to raise questions in order to allow students to deeply explore, discuss and reflect. In the Indigenous Australian studies classroom, there are occasions where students generate questions that the lecturer cannot answer. This in turn begins another cycle of reflection-action-reflection as both student and teacher enter into a dialogue together to find what it is that needs to be learnt and to better understand what is problematic about a situation. We also feel that PBL is ideally suited to engaging with topics and issues in Indigenous Australian studies which may be challenging because it replicates what we understand about Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and ways of being in teaching and learning contexts.

To better understand the rationale for this practice-based initiative, it is important to understand the historical and contemporary location of Indigenous studies in Australian education systems. As well as making provision for Indigenous Australians to be involved in educational decision making and to have equitable access to education, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989), mandated state and territory governments across the country to “provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures” (Craven, 1999, p. 18). Since its inception, primary and secondary schools’ curricula and teachers have wavered between positive engagement and complacent dismissal with the policy in this regard, and the progress of NATSIEP at best has been slow (Beresford, 2003, p. 24). Tertiary institutions are also required to engage with NATSIEP and historically the implementation of the policy has been left to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies student support centres or units (see Lampert & Lilley, 1996). For example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland, where we are based, administers an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Major program of study to address this aspect of NATSIEP. Recent trends in tertiary educational settings however see universities taking greater ownership of the seriousness and importance of teaching Indigenous Australian knowledges in their courses and are working towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the entire curriculum. This also includes taking on board Indigenous ways of teaching and learning and it is hoped that our research into the promise of PBL for Indigenous Australian studies can contribute further to this process.

The PBL package used in this course and discussed in this Nuts and Bolts session is titled “Re/presenting Hindmarsh Island: Aboriginal Women’s Business”. The PBL package focuses on the history and ongoing academic and public debates around Aboriginal women’s traditional ownership of Hindmarsh Island in South Australia and seeks to raise a number of questions about relationships to country, gender and knowledge, and the impact of

colonisation and the continued silencing of Aboriginal voices in Australia today. On completion of this package students have:

1. described the Hindmarsh Island case;
2. examined the results of the recent High Court decision in relation to Hindmarsh Island, current status and the implications of the decision in relation to Native Title;
3. described aspects of women's role in Aboriginal culture that are relevant to an understanding of this case and women's relationship to land as a whole;
4. identified similarities and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches and perspectives presented in relation to the Hindmarsh Island affair;
5. considered the different discourses at play in the Hindmarsh Island affair and the way that these discourses work to silence and/or empower Aboriginal women;
6. adapted to a situation where they have primary responsibility for their own learning and the teaching staff act as facilitators rather than authorities; and
7. demonstrated their acceptance of the responsibilities of collaborative learning.

### **How it is done**

The PBL package is completed in two weeks across two individual classes. In the first class the students are first given an introduction to the learning material in the form of a handout about the historical background to the Hindmarsh Island case. The main stimulus material which follows is a short video excerpt of a journalist reporting on the "facts" of the case and questioning the legitimacy of Aboriginal women's claims to ownership. Students then form small groups of 4-6 people to begin to try to understand what they have seen and talk about the main issues raised in the learning material. By the end of the first class, each small group is expected to develop research questions which will help them to consider the main issues. Once each group has framed the issues raised in their discussion as research questions, each group is asked to share their list of research questions with the entire class. The research questions are collated and each group is assigned one of these questions. Each group is then expected to explore their research question/s between PBL sessions. Students are encouraged to meet as a group outside of class to do this or to allocate each group member a specific task to bring back to class next week. In the second class, the learning stimulus material is revisited briefly. The groups then reform with each individual group member contributing the information they have researched over the past week to come to an understanding of the research question/s. The group then decides what information they would like to present back to the class on their research question/s. This information may be presented in any format (e.g. on an OHT, PowerPoint slides, as a group performance) and may be presented by the entire group or a nominated spokesperson. Each group presents an exploration of their research question/s back to the class. The class works together to come to a series of main points which address the research question/s raised in this PBL as a whole, keeping in mind that more questions may actually be raised than answered. An important part about PBL is self-directed learning where the role of lecturers is to guide students through the PBL package—in this way becoming teachers and learners together.

## Impact

Using interview and focus-group results, observational classroom data, lecturer reflections and assessed student work, this Nuts and Bolts presentation reported on the effectiveness of PBL to accommodate diversity through curriculum and achieve transformative learning for first year students in “Indigenous Australian Issues.” The course seeks to actively deconstruct historical and contemporary entanglements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and, in doing so, help build better working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Discussion in and around these issues necessarily involves talking about the violence of colonialism, the racism often inherent in white imaginings of Indigenous people, and the continued oppression of Indigenous people today. This is, as hooks (1994, p. 154) describes, “difficult material.” It moves away from that “cozy, good feeling” into the realms of awkward memory and knowing (McConaghy, 2003, p. 11). Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can find themselves “exploring, experiencing and processing emotions, memories, and other aspects of themselves that were previously unknown” (Butterwick & Selman, 2003, 14). Savin-Baden (2000) aptly comments that “learning is about engaging different dimensions of ourselves in the learning process. Emotions and feelings are often the ones that are most neglected in learning” (p. 55) and hooks (1994), too, notes that the “restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place” (p. 155). We will report on how the dialogic nature of PBL provides an opportunity for students and lecturers to air and talk through the kinds of emotional and intellectual discomforts they are experiencing, and via this discursive exchange, create the possibility to replace old ways of knowing and being with something new (Boler, 2004, p. 129). One of the biggest impacts we will explore is the ways that PBL, as a teaching and learning approach: opens up the potential for students to ask difficult questions, engage emotionally and personally with intellectual material, through critical reflection develop a sense of empathy with Indigenous Australian peoples; and compels students towards action for change.

### At the Nuts and Bolts presentation

#### *Audience participation*

After describing the context of Indigenous Australian studies at The University of Queensland and providing some discussion of PBL as transformative learning, we ran a 15 minute workshop using the Hindmarsh Island PBL package as a condensed PBL session so that participants could experience and reflect on the transformative aspects of this teaching and learning approach. We provided participants with the PBL package handout and showed the short learning stimulus video clip. We then asked participants to form small groups to generate research questions about the package. To conclude, we shared our insights from our research with first year students in relation to this PBL package using feedback from students from post-questionnaires and a focus group interview (see Appendix 1) to demonstrate how it can achieve diversity through curriculum to lead to transformative learning.

#### *Overview of participant’s responses*

During the short workshop, participants actively engaged with the PBL package, discussed the issues and generated questions to report back to the group. Many participants asked us

questions about the Hindmarsh Island case and the activity engendered much discussion. Questions the small groups generated included:

- Why are we not hearing the voices of women in this program?
- Are Indigenous cultural issues an impediment to broader social needs?
- What are the underlying agendas?
- How do we verify the importance (cultural/historical/environmental) of this piece of land?

The depth of this questioning reinforced our contention that this particular case is ideal as a scenario in PBL and conversely that PBL as a process successfully fosters dialogue around issues. However, the timeframe of the workshop was extremely short and we are aware that transformative learning takes time to occur. As Schapiro (2009) reminds us, it is important to note that

transformative learning is not something that can necessarily happen on a schedule or within the confines of a particular structured learning experience. Developing the trust and safety that can make it possible for people to take risks—allowing the needed space for disequilibrium, exploration, and reintegration, and for action and reflection—takes time, time that can best be measured in weeks, months, or even years, and certainly not in hours or days. (p. 113)

### **Additional research with our students in relation to PBL**

This study is part of a larger project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for 2010-11. The project aims to evaluate the effectiveness of PBL as transformative education in Indigenous Australian Studies at the tertiary level and explore the relationship between Indigenous pedagogies and PBL. The next stage of our research is expanding the study beyond first year students to second and third year classes at four other key centres of teaching in Indigenous Australian studies that use PBL approaches: Monash University, University of Technology Sydney, Charles Darwin University and University of Newcastle. Supported by us, project team members at these universities will gather evidence through interviews and focus groups, classroom observation, lecturer reflections and assessed student work in their courses which use PBL. Overall, by exploring the use of PBL as pedagogy the project aims to transform student's beliefs, actions and lives and help build a better future for Indigenous Australians.

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## Appendix 1. Examples of feedback from first year Indigenous Australian studies students after undertaking PBL package

### Example Post-Questionnaire Responses

“I learnt a lot more about Hindmarsh Island in 2 weeks of lectures listening to other students and viewing the sixty minutes footage than if I had to research one essay topic.”
“I can see clearly the possibility/opportunity that PBL offers for more expansive and engaging learning than just being ‘talked at’ from the front of the room.”
“A personal journey. Benefit of being able to work with a team. I’ll remember this for a long time.”
“Overall a good experience. The group was co-operative and made it a fun process while the learning from other groups brought different perspectives, perspectives I may not have thought about otherwise.”
“Very interesting, enjoyed the interactivity of it.”
“Feel as though I probably learnt more this way, as a group we could share our research.”
“PBL are a great opportunity to speak your mind to your group members, and to hear them speak, it's nice to understand peoples different views of the world. People often get excited with group and ideas. Helps retain info.”
“Very good. Helped to connect with other students and was an ‘active’ way to learn in contrast to passive listening and note taking.”
“It has been a learning experience each and everyone’s presentation was great. I have learnt so much about Indigenous knowledge and the issues facing the Indigenous people up to date.”
“Helped me engage in the course. Made me feel more comfortable in the lecture. Exchanged ideas with other peers.”
“Really worthwhile – it’s excellent to be able to discuss views in a small environment. I found the brainstorming of ideas to be really helpful.”
“I enjoyed doing research on a topic that I previously had not much knowledge about. Regardless with whether I believe in or not about the things we present.”
“It was beneficial because it made me think more critically about the specific topics.”
“A good way to learn information. Some people got angry about the situations being discussed and made knowledge transmission difficult. The different styles of presenting information kept it interesting.”

### Example Focus Group Interview Responses

“I felt it aligned with an Indigenous way of knowing because, from what I’ve noticed, Indigenous Knowledge isn’t segmented, it’s a holistic type of knowledge. So if you’re only given aspects of it in ‘chalk n talk’ learning then you can’t explore the topic fully...It’s a group effort of learning, that’s how I see it.”
“Groups can be problematic but fortunately I was in a fabulous group, there was [sic] differences in opinions but it worked, everyone was accepting.”
“It is good doing it in first year...in first year you’ve got a real opportunity to get some people to think about issues they may not have thought about and then direct how they might think about issues for the rest of their uni and the rest of their life.”
“The process of researching to learn, rather than listening worked. The outcome for me was good.”
“The variety of contributions was really fulfilling.”
“I learnt there are multiple perspectives...it’s about understanding the complexities.”
“The power of whiteness was something that really became clear to me.”
“The gender issue came up for me. Being a white male. That just keeps getting nailed into me. Which is good, which is great...I’m glad it’s been integrated into my life at this stage and not when I’m 50. I can start changing the way I live and knowing there are different sides of issues. Gender and Indigenous issues are so related and linked.”
“If there’s commitment of participants, then it can be transformative.”
“the way it’s transformative is that it informs the reality of situations and moves the illusion around what people’s perceptions are...you’ve had an opportunity to grow and change and I think that’s about getting really ‘present’ about how it is for other people.”



“Is it empathy instead of sympathy? It’s sort of getting into someone else’s shoes. By having to do all the research into it and go a bit deeper it should make people really connect with the issue.”

“It’s laid the seeds for part of the process of transformation...it was transformative for me to really go back and have a look at what was the story, the issues, it was transformative to go deeper.”

“It was sort of nice that everyone had a different format to present it in, it made it more interesting. The song and the words, people just speaking, PowerPoint, I liked the creative side of it.”