

Honi Soit

University of Sydney's community classrooms show the power of Indigenising education

On the role of education in fostering cultural competence.



SLIC students with members of Tribal Warrior.

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Last semester, as university students were plunged into quarantine, 17 were working with Indigenous organisations from their bedrooms and balconies.

Through the interdisciplinary unit FASS3500 – Service Learning in Indigenous Communities (SLIC), they developed solutions to high-priority issues such as funding shortages as well as social restrictions that have prevented many organisations from operating.

“More than any other university course, SLIC allowed for an exploration of Aboriginal self-determination and resilience on Gadigal land” one participant says. “It was a distinctly different interaction with the history and the land on which Sydney University stands.”

Run by the University's Indigenous Strategy and Services portfolio, SLIC aims to improve students' cultural competence.

But rather than learning in a traditional classroom setting, students learn in a “community classroom,” working directly with Indigenous people to address their identified needs and priorities.

Despite some roadblocks over the past few years, SLIC has become stronger than ever, and its current educational approach demonstrates how cultural competence can be taught effectively, how well engagement with Indigenous communities can be facilitated, and how we can prioritise Indigenous perspectives in tertiary education.

What does ‘cultural competence’ mean?

Cultural competence is defined in USyd’s Graduate Qualities as “the ability to actively, ethically, respectfully, and successfully engage across and between cultures.”

This is just one of many definitions. For Dr Demalza Marlin, an Academic Facilitator and Lecturer at the National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC) who is of Wiradjuri heritage, cultural competence is a process of ongoing learning.

“It’s a capacity for self-reflection and self-assessment in order to engage in behaviours that facilitate culturally safe spaces,” she says. “This is particularly important for universities, which can be perceived as largely white institutions”

Emerging in the 1980s in fields of health and education, cultural competence training has since become commonplace across a variety of sectors.

The University committed to cultural competence back in its 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, collaborating with the NCCC to make changes to the curriculum and teaching. This includes working with staff to develop anti-racist teaching practices, as well as the creation of SLIC and several open learning environment units.

“We currently don’t have an inclusive education system. We’re working towards it and cultural competence is a piece of that puzzle”, Dr Marlin says.

“Through cultural competence education we encourage people to become reflexive about their beliefs, values, assumptions, and social positioning, and understand all of that in a socio-political context.”

Is cultural competence training effective?

Research has shown that cultural competence training can have a positive impact on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of participants.

In one study, social work students demonstrated an increased awareness of racial privilege and overt forms of discrimination. In the health profession, it has been shown to reduce provider bias and improve patient-provider communication.

However, the concept is not without its critics. Gordon Pon, an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work at Ryerson University argues that cultural competence can reinforce power imbalances by stereotyping, essentialising and “othering” minorities.

This is especially the case where it is conflated with cultural awareness, a very different concept which tends to focus on the acquisition of knowledge rather than a set of attitudes and practices.

Others criticise the fact that ‘competency’ implies an endpoint, assuming that it is possible to learn a quantifiable set of skills or knowledge that will allow them to interact effectively with all people.

Amy Cole, another academic facilitator at the NCCC, recognises that criticisms are valid. However, she believes that where it is done well, cultural competence education can be incredibly transformative.

“At the university, we don’t focus on what particular groups of people do, think or act like. This could lead to stereotypes or lead people to make generalisations”, she says.

Instead, USyd’s initiatives aim to provide staff and students with the tools to critically interrogate the assumptions, values and expectations that they bring into all their relationships.

Dr Marlin describes this as “de-centring” their world views: “This kind of critical self-reflection helps people start engaging with cultural difference and diversity empathetically, without measuring it against their own norms.”

Service learning in Indigenous communities

Although cultural competence at USyd is primarily targeted towards staff, SLIC is one of the main initiatives directed at students. It adopts a service learning model, a form of experiential education where academic learning is integrated with the fulfilment of community needs.

The unit is made up of three main components: students first undergo several weeks of preparation, then spend a week living in a remote Indigenous community. Finally, they develop and present their solutions back to Community.



Tribal Warrior Smoking ceremony for SLIC students.

In the past, students have travelled to the Northern Territory, the Torres Strait, and Western New South Wales. Due to COVID-19, students who completed the unit last

semester worked with local organisations online, with local organisations Gamarada Universal Indigenous Resources (GUIR) and Tribal Warrior Aboriginal Corporation.

“The close partnership of students and Community forges truly outstanding relationships and remarkable educational outcomes”, says A/Prof Evans, a Wiradjuri woman and previous academic coordinator for SLIC.

“It’s a very active process of learning. The fact that you are working with Community creates a sense of obligation and reciprocity that is very sincere. This may not happen in a conventional learning environment where you are reading text, watching and listening to videos.”

Althea, who participated in SLIC last semester, says that service learning goes beyond a mere acknowledgement and appreciation for diversity in our community, and that “it teaches you how to really listen to others, how to participate ethically and with humility.”

Another student, Ranuka, learned to identify more subtle forms of racism in the way she thinks and feels about Indigenous people: “I’ve always seen my own empathy as a positive part of my personality. However, even this is informed by a Western lens that on some level, sees those you feel empathy for as being below you.”

While the unit is not perfect — some students felt that there was too much of a focus on assessment outcomes — its overwhelming strength is its close connection to Community.

The potential for harm

Before completing the unit, some students were cautious about the potential for harm or exploitation, especially due to widespread trends of voluntourism.

“I was very sceptical about SLIC to begin with,” Ranuka says. “I think the idea that a bunch of rich, white students could go out to rural Australia and come up with solutions for the issues communities are facing out there is delusional and paternalistic, and it made me uncomfortable.”

Other students were aware of SLIC’s unfortunate history. In 2017, Shane Houston was dismissed as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Services and Strategy) and replaced by Kylie Gwynne. This meant that SLIC was temporarily under non-Indigenous leadership, and several aspects of the initiative were changed without consultation.

But today, the unit uses practices that are much healthier than what was previously seen. Indigenous academics have since regained control over the initiative, with last semester’s coordinating and supervising team comprising A/Prof Evans, Suzanne Kenney, and Penny Viles.

They currently work within the portfolio of Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver, a Wiradjuri woman appointed to the role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy and Services) in 2018.

Further, academic staff spend a considerable amount of time collaborating with Community to ensure that they know exactly what students will be doing and that engagement is both safe and productive.

“We want to ensure that students contribute in ways that are of benefit to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities while respecting knowledge and knowledge ownership” A/Prof Evans says.



Shane Phillips, CEO, Tribal Warrior, speaking to SLIC students.

Ken Zulumovski Hon DHSc was one of the community partners involved in SLIC this year. He is a descendant of the Kabi Kabi people, and is the founder and Managing Director of Gamarada.

“The program exists in a way that it is so open to Community,” he says. “I felt like there was a real acknowledgement and respect for the space that we work in, and understanding of cultural protocols; of how we as First Nations people do business our way.”

Adopting an Indigenous lens

While the unit is marketed as an opportunity to “make a real difference to Indigenous communities,” SLIC puts more emphasis on teaching students how to form healthy relationships with Indigenous people.

Students are briefed extensively by academics and community speakers in order to ensure that they not only have the tools to interact safely, but also a healthy outlook on the project.

The idea that students can “solve” problems in Community can indeed perpetuate patronising and unhelpful ideas about the places they visit, however students are actively taught not to be motivated by that prospect.

A/Prof Evans explains that their primary goal is to learn to contribute, to be humble, to listen carefully, and engage in behaviours that show respect to Community during their placements.

“The course flipped that notion of ‘what can I get out of this?’ on its head, ensuring that our focus was on service rather than self-gain or reward,” says Genevieve, another participant.

This extends beyond physical interactions. As students prepare their final reports, students learn how to use Indigenous research methodologies and utilise Indigenous knowledge or property in a way that respects original ownership.

And after the semester, ongoing relationships with Community are supported, with students getting the opportunity to continue working on their projects.

Can community engagement be incorporated into other degrees?

Currently, SLIC is a standalone unit available to students who are in their final years of university. Staff have ongoing plans to continue expanding the unit, however, it would still be restricted to a fairly small group of students.

Ideally, there would be more opportunities for practical engagement with Indigenous communities built into people’s degrees.

While this may be achievable at some point in the future, the main issue is how opportunities can expand in a way that doesn’t place inordinate pressure on communities. There would need to be mobilisation and resourcing of communities before that can occur.

However, service learning is not the only way that students can improve their cultural competence and understanding. The NCCC at USyd offers resources and workshops that are led by Indigenous academics, and local organisations such as GUIR run initiatives such as community healing circles that are open to non-Indigenous people.

Additionally, changing aspects of our current educational practices can result in extremely powerful forms of incidental learning.

Healthy practices in the classroom

In 2016, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to develop representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in new NSW syllabuses.

Similar practices should be translated to the university context for students and staff alike.

In our research and writing as well as curriculum development, it should be questioned whether the same outcomes can be achieved by focusing on Indigenous histories, phenomena, people, stories and cultures.

We also need to be constantly reminding ourselves to check our language, and use our words in a way that respects and elevates Indigenous people.

“When we talk about places — locations, towns and suburbs — in our essays, for example, we can continually recognise whose land those places are on,” A/Prof Evans says. “It would even be a healthy learning opportunity for students in university classes to be asked the question: whose Country are you on, and what do you know about that Country?”

And when discussing Indigenous issues, it is important that we are checking the authors of the sources we use in order to ensure that there is a fair representation of Indigenous ownership on topics that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people.

“All schools and disciplines should be looking for Indigenous perspectives and centering the voices of First-Nations peoples” Genevieve says. “There is so much wisdom in consulting these communities and allowing their voices to take priority in the stratosphere of education and pedagogy.”

Working towards better relationships

Until only a few decades ago, Indigenous Australians were excluded from tertiary education. Charles Perkins was USyd’s first Aboriginal graduate in 1966, and Indigenous participation in research and Western scientific traditions has only emerged in the past 30 years.



So for A/Prof Evans, watching students develop an authentic connection with Indigenous culture during their degree is the most rewarding aspect of SLIC. “These engagements are incredibly important as society is still working through their knowledge of past policies affecting Aboriginal people.”

While students that are passionate about the ongoing fight for Indigenous sovereignty may perceive themselves as having relatively high levels of cultural competence and understanding, the opposite is almost always the case.

We have a long way to go in committing to learn from and listen to Indigenous people, especially at the University. It is important that we take every opportunity to improve our relationships with Indigenous people, land and knowledge in the classroom and beyond.

This is a process that the University must actively support, both in its unit offerings, its funding of projects by Indigenous academics, and its upcoming strategic plan.

“I don’t think anyone can ever be truly culturally competent,” Cole says. “But we all need to take responsibility for our learning.”

While taking this responsibility is a small step, changing our practices would mean that Indigenous people entering the university space can feel that their identity is seen, respected, responded to, and that we are reaching out to create the relationships that were denied for decades.