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Guiding principles for teaching Indigenous Australian school students

A publication produced by the project *Improving educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students begins at the cultural interface in the classroom*,

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Introduction

A number of 'best practice' principles have been distilled from the project, *Improving educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students begins at the cultural interface in the classroom* – a project undertaken at The University of Queensland and supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

These principles have been selected to better prepare pre-service teachers to teach Indigenous students on their practicums, as well as on graduation. These principles have been selected as being within the scope of pre-service and graduate teachers to implement in the classroom setting. Further, the guiding principles have been kept to a minimum to enhance their accessibility.

The guiding principles are informed by a relational approach to learning and teaching. Such an approach is enabled through a culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum. This guide provides a brief overview of the principles and some suggested strategies for teaching at the cultural interface.

A relational approach to learning and teaching

The implementation of a *relational (connected) approach* to learning and teaching is the overarching principle underpinning all of the principles outlined in this guide. This broad principle is broken down into two key aspects, specifically:

Relationships (connections) need to be developed and sustained with students and more broadly with their parents/carers and community Elders as *partners* in education.

- Connectedness is a central organising principle for Indigenous peoples. It is about making connections between people within their social environment, that is, the importance of an individual's need to be placed within a known social universe.
- Making a 'connection' is one of the first tasks a beginning teacher needs to undertake on arrival in a school with a strong population of Indigenous students. It is ideal if this connection is initiated *prior* to commencement at the school, particularly if the school is located within an Indigenous community.

Relationships (connections) need to be authentic and built on a platform of respect, partnership, trust and safety.

- Developing relationships based on trust and respect is critically important in schooling due to the past colonial practices, wherein Indigenous peoples' knowledge, language, culture and lived experiences were denigrated, dismissed or in some cases banned.
- Teachers need to get to know Indigenous students as rounded individuals both within the school environment and in broader community contexts.

Enacting a relational approach

A relational approach to schooling is enacted in the classroom through developing a culturally responsive learning environment that is cognisant of the concept of cultural safety. To do this, a teacher needs to ensure the following:

Curricular content is explicitly *relevant* to Indigenous students.

- Even though teachers are not always aware of it, the curriculum is likely to have a bias toward the dominant cultural group. The result of this is that Indigenous students may feel excluded and devalued. The incorporation of relevant material presented in a culturally sensitive manner enhances Indigenous students' pride in their cultural identity and engagement in their learning.
- Teachers need to 'keep it real'. Students want to know why they are learning specific content and how it will help them in the real world.

There is an appreciation of cultural diversity and understanding students as *individual* learners.

- Current educational practice theory highlights the importance of respecting diversity and facilitating inclusiveness for *all* students. Teachers need to build a cultural diversity knowledge base which includes an appreciation of cultural 'characteristics', language and contributions to knowledge and society.
- A fine balance must be struck between understanding the potential impacts of culture on learning while understanding and valuing all students as individual learners with unique skills and capacities, rather than as representatives of their specific cultures.

***High expectations* of individual learners are maintained and students are supported to achieve these.**

- Indigenous students often receive the message that they are 'dumb'. Without realising it, teachers can buy in to this message by overly focussing on challenges and negative stereotypes. These teachers may start to expect less from Indigenous students.
- To counter this, teachers need to believe in the capacity of individual Indigenous students and to set realistic but high expectations for their behaviour and their academic achievement. In this way, Indigenous students are able to engage with learning from a position of strength. Experience tells us that when these expectations are in place, Indigenous students often do all they can to meet them.
- At the same time, teachers need to provide students with the necessary knowledge, support and tools to assist them to achieve these expectations.

A *partnership* approach to teaching is implemented.

- The best outcomes are achieved when a partnership approach to teaching is undertaken. Partnership is inclusive of all the key people in a student's education. Community members, particularly community Elders, are critical to enhancing student learning in a number of ways, including through developing a relevant and culturally inclusive curriculum; supporting school initiatives and teaching practice; and supporting individual teachers to connect with the local community according to local protocols.
- Non-Indigenous pre-service and graduate teachers need to recognise the unique knowledge and talents of Indigenous teachers and support staff in their school. These staff are often undervalued and underutilised; however, they are critical in building connections with students, parents and communities. They are also able to assist with ways to make the curriculum more relevant, as well as providing ideas about how to teach it in ways that are more likely to engage Indigenous learners.

Simple things that pre-service and graduate teachers can do:

- Come with an open attitude and willingness to listen and learn, *and to keep on learning*.
- Research the community and the school before you arrive – Who are the Indigenous people? What is the Indigenous history? What are the current challenges and opportunities? Remember: Every community is different.
- If commencing in an Indigenous community school, telephone the local community council prior to arrival to introduce yourself. Find out who is the best person to talk to and get their perspective on schooling in their community: Arrange to meet personally soon after your arrival.
- Be prepared to spend time listening and ‘yarning’. It is important to get to know each other. It is just as important for the community to get to know you as for you to know the community; so get involved in community events and share a bit of yourself.
- Smile, be welcoming and be yourself. Sometimes people just need that little bit of reassurance to take the first step.
- Adapt the physical environment of the classroom to accommodate the Indigenous children. This can be done by providing a space where the children can meet and talk together or incorporating relevant images and artefacts.
- Finally, don’t be too hard on yourself. We all make mistakes but if the local community understands that you are trying and want to learn, they will help you.

The University of Queensland project team for Teaching at the cultural interface

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A detailed report on the Teaching at the Cultural Interface project is available from the Office for Learning and Teaching website: www.olt.gov.au

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