Defining Culturally Safe
And Inclusive Practice: Collaborative Efforts For Indigenous Frameworks
In Higher Education

Johnnie Aseron, Southern Cross University, Australia
Simon Wilde, Southern Cross University, Australia
Adrian Miller, Griffith University, Australia
S. Neyooxet Greymorning, Southern Cross University, Australia

Abstract
As a recognition for the continuing need to address the economic, social and educational disparity between Indigenous and non–Indigenous populations, this research focused on community identified understandings of key barriers and obstacles pertaining to sustained participation in higher education by Indigenous populations. Our initial investigations revealed the need to identify a manner that would include a safe cultural methodology necessary to engendering this participation. It became evident that current levels of understanding surrounding issues and ideas about acculturation, inclusiveness and multiculturalism were barriers to Indigenous Peoples participation in higher education.

With these ideas in mind, our early investigative attempts necessitated an understanding of what comprised and created cultural safety. The ensuing higher education participation conversations required a secure platform, both to develop as well as investigate, with community participation, current understandings of higher education, past recognisable efforts, as well as thoughts for what might work, could work, for future attempts.

Keywords: Indigenous higher education participation, cultural safety, cultural safety circles, Indigenous led research.

Introduction
With an increasing number of publications from both institutional and governmental organisations raising questions as to cultural awareness or sensitivity practices, many researchers have begun to attempt a description of cultural safety (Edwards et al., 2007; Wilson, 2006; Graveline, 2000). However, models or methods for achieving competency and/or best practices for achieving cultural safety, within higher education, remains an unresolved issue.

Whilst there is growing evidence concerning cultural safety and cultural competency beginning to gain attention as an avenue for research and comment (Ramsden, 2002; National Aboriginal Health Organisation, 2006), very little extant literature exists that describes the methodology necessary to achieve such a desired state.

Further, pre–existent Indigenous People’s cultural definitions of methodology for achieving cultural safety and/or competency are varied in their approach. Even where shared commonalities and practices can be identified, care must be taken so as not to engender presumption in practice and method delivery (or understanding of practice and method), which can arise when utilising Indigenous People’s culturally specific models. Simply put, one of the thoughts informing the nature of the research was to ask the question: Are there current understandings and ideas for a collective, identifiable method to both assuring and creating cultural safety in respect to higher education participation by Indigenous populations?
Research Overview and Literature

As defined in the UN Millennium Declaration (September, 2000), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) raised issues for the input and inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within the development debate. Since that time this debate has produced other key documents including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (September, 2007) and, more recently, the UN State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples report (2009). Within this report are some key issues recognised as important to better integrate issues for Indigenous Peoples into MDG goals, policies and programmes. ‘Policies must be put in place to insure that Indigenous Peoples have universal access to quality culturally-sensitive social services. Some areas of particular concern are inter–cultural/bilingual education and culturally sensitive material…’ (UN State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, 2009, p. 40). This report exemplifies the continued use of the ideas of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity, which assumes methodology, as well as practitioners conversant in such a method.

Further, Ramsden (1992) explains that cultural safety is achieved from a continuing process that moves from cultural awareness (input) to cultural sensitivity (competency) and finally cultural safety/security (outcome). Despite the plethora of ideas surrounding cultural awareness, sensitivity or safety, little identifiable literature exists that links methods to achievement or desired outcome. This research, therefore, is a practical analysis of processes, which is suggested by the absence of current established models unencumbered by preconceived or presumed knowledge (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003).

With a mandate to achieve new benchmarks surrounding ideas stemming from higher education efforts for people from low socio–economic backgrounds (for example, see the Australian Government’s Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program – HEPPP – which was developed in response to the Bradley Report, 2008), a method appropriate and inclusive of all cultural backgrounds would suggest that these research efforts are critical to an understanding of the ‘stakeholders’ view, in both participation and resultant consultative forums (Aseron & Malkin, 2006).

Broadening this understanding within a consultative process, for many tribal groups an important tool for preserving their cultural identities was through a tradition of oral narratives. These narratives provided the people with a vehicle through which many things were learned (education). Through story, the world was shaped and given meaning and as the people’s world took on meaning, they adopted specific cultural worldviews and practices. When imbalances occurred within this meaning, there were culturally safe mechanisms, often through ritual and ceremony that would be performed. Such mechanisms played a major role in how tribal members conducted themselves in culturally safe and appropriate ways.

Among the more recognizable descriptions for these cultural mechanisms are those of the ‘Yarning Circle’ and the ‘Talking Circle’. The Yarning Circle description encompasses both modern and historic communal gathering processes found amongst many Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (Bennet, 1997). Additionally, many people would be familiar with the Talking Circle concept introduced into the Reconciliation movement and adapted from Native American Cultures (Picou, 2000). Both descriptions derive from Indigenous Peoples’ methods recorded through the stories, songs and ceremonies as mechanisms for inclusion into the transfer of knowledge, participation in the decision making process and identifying of shared goals and desired outcomes for community.

Cultural Safety Circles (CSC’s) are borne of this wisdom, found within Indigenous Peoples’ traditional ways and practices. CSC’s are an acknowledgement of these traditional methods for sharing, learning, identifying and defining a manner by which we may learn to come together ‘in a good way’. The application of CSC’s provides a collective space where definitions for cultural and educational exchange take place and can be identified. It is through this application that the inherent issue of cultural safety can then be explored.
Research Method / Overview

The main aim of this research is the exploration of the need to develop current and relevant methods for an equitable and shared definition of the process needed to achieve cultural competence and the subsequent cultural safety, both as theory and in practice.

As previously noted, little significant literature currently exists, as this topic is under researched. More significant to the lack of extant literature are the conflicting ideas for definitions of cultural safety, as defined through Indigenous and non–Indigenous paradigms. Creation of an appropriate space, as recognised and defined by community members, as well as service and education providers, is needed to initiate an intersection inclusive of a cross sampling of cultural groups. This inclusivity then becomes essential, if not paramount, to that success.

For this research effort the view that qualitative and quantitative methods both merit employment was accepted, as is also the perspective that qualitative research is generally suited to theory generation and quantitative to theory testing (Parkhe 1993, Strauss & Corbin 1990). The need to discern presupposed experience and assumption surrounding method to achieve awareness of cultural competency and resultant cultural safety is justified.

Data Collection, Analysis and Discussion

Data for this paper derives from three focus group discussions involving 76 participants of which 34 identified themselves as Indigenous Australian or other Indigenous nation. A further demographic breakdown saw 31% of participants being male. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a non–probability sampling approach, specifically a volunteer ‘opt–in’ sampling strategy (Sue & Ritter, 2007) was embraced for these discussions. Each group was lead by an experienced Aboriginal Australian Elder and/or academic researcher. Focus group discussions lasted approximately 45 minutes. In satisfying the stated research objectives, this study further adopted a quantitative instrument administered as both a pre– and post– survey to each focus group member. The nature of the quantitative instrument was to gauge participants’ views and understanding as to the notion of cultural safety, both prior to and following detailed focus group discussions involving ideas about cultural competence and safety.

Respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement to ten (10) questions related to ideas of cultural competency and safety practices. Respondents indicated their levels of agreement via a 5 point Likert scale, by assigning a value between 1 (never) and 5 (always) to each question. Questions included (but were not limited to) ideas and statements such as; ‘Have you ever spoken about cultural safety with people of your own cultural background?’; ‘Do you believe that you must first understand a culture different to your own in order to achieve cultural safety/competence?’; and ‘Do you believe that cultural safety is important enough and should be taught in schools?’

Results of the subsequent quantitative analysis found that two particular questions raised noteworthy responses. For example, when asked ‘Do you believe that you are culturally aware?’, the difference in pre and post response was recorded as 4.01 and 3.72 respectively (on a 5 point scale), indicating that after (post) the focus group discussions about cultural safety ideas, respondents were potentially challenged on the notion that they initially felt (pre–discussion) that they were ‘culturally aware’. An additional question inquired ‘Do you believe that the cultural safety circle or method allows for the identification of individual and group understanding?’ garnishing 3.57 (on the 5 point Likert scale) in the pre discussion instrument as opposed to a positive increase to 3.97 in the post response. Again, this potentially indicates that following the focus group discussions about cultural safety and methodology, participants were more positive in agreement to the use and implementation of a cultural safety circle, as a methodology to engender both greater understanding and confidence for feeling culturally safe.

While these quantitative indicators add some insight into group participants’ current views and understanding about a general idea of cultural safety and cultural safety practice, the qualitative results were highly informative and enlightening to the wider research objectives, with more specific observation on attitudes towards Western paradigmatic educational practices.
One significant theme to arise across the three focus group discussions were ideas and understandings relating to an identifiable method for defining, understanding and achieving a shared sense of cultural safety/competence, as relates to higher education and higher education activities. Although there was little to no group consensus for an agreed definition about a shared sense of a methodology appropriate to this investigation (and the achievement of the resultant cultural safety/competence), there was, however, a heightened awareness for the inclusion of some kind of cultural safety methodology, of which cultural safety circles might be considered as appropriate (this discussion seems to be evidenced through the earlier quantitative results as noted above).

Another prominent theme centred on the perceived inherent dangers with the assumption that Indigenous populations view higher education providers (such as a university or education campus) as accessible. It was expressed through the discussions that apprehension exists in working with or going to ‘the uni’. The expression of feeling uncomfortable or alienated to a higher education experience was also tied to location, with comments noted about participants having never really had business at a higher education institution (such as a university campus), or understanding ‘what goes on there…’

Perhaps this apprehension could be mitigated to a greater or lesser degree by understanding that stakeholder ship is not engendered by fractured attempts to engage Indigenous populations in one–off or infrequent, unsustained efforts or events. As a consequence, a further theme borne from the discussions was that Aboriginal Australians, in some areas and disciplines, are self–identifying as being ‘over researched’. This notion was essentially couched in the perspective that such attempts and approaches by researchers are driven by the research and institutional agenda, as opposed to the needs of the Indigenous populations themselves:

‘They only call us when they need to get money’ said one Aboriginal Australian male Elder.

Conclusion

Despite the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers found that a divergent understanding exists as to: 1) what is culture, 2) what is cultural safety, and 3) what cultural safety practices can be identified as appropriate for engendering Indigenous participation in higher education. As previously discussed, the distinct lack of extant literature in the area of cultural competence/safety and related methodologies for higher education participation suggests that this current research will add knowledge in an attempt to close this research gap in some key areas.

Within this research effort, a cultural competency or cultural safety methodology investigation can continue, with the participation of Indigenous Peoples and non–Indigenous stakeholders, government agencies, non–government entities and higher educational institutions contributing significantly to the lack of description and understanding for practice and method found within the current literature. The maintenance of continuity that allows ongoing activity, investigation and development of stronger and deeper levels for identifying, defining and understanding a cultural safety framework, are also desired outcomes.

There are a number of inherent limitations within exploratory studies, both in institutional understanding and within Indigenous Peoples research paradigms. As one example, Indigenous populations encompass a tribal affiliation system that does not recognise borders in the same manner as their non–Indigenous counterparts, whereby institutional research initiatives are typically constrained to smaller geographical regions that often do not correlate with tribal boundaries. As a further consequence, such Indigenous Peoples research efforts and the subsequent findings may not be applicable to all Indigenous populations as a ‘one size fits all’ perspective. Therefore, exploration of this lack of connectivity suggests the need to develop larger linkages with both higher education institutions and Indigenous populations.

Acknowledgements

This research is an outcome of a project funded through the Australian Federal Government’s Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of Professor Stephen Kelly for his involvement in the broader initiative. Also, of primary importance, is the recognition of interest, support and participation of the various Indigenous populations, including Australian Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islanders, particularly those of the Gumbaynggirr, Dunghutti and Bundjalung nations, Native Americans and First Peoples of the US and Canada, in particular the Haudenosee, Arapaho and Lakota nations; whose input, interest, vision and patience informed the basis, body and purpose of this research effort. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge all of our Elders, past and present, for their wisdom and forbearance in the maintenance of our various cultural ways and practices.

Author Information

Johnnie Aseron is currently the Lead Project Officer of an Indigenous Community Directed Capacity Building Project at Southern Cross Business School, Southern Cross University (Australia). Along with more than 25 years of extensive work in Indigenous community development programs (including health and wellbeing, education, socio-economic and culturally focused issues), the past few years he has lectured for the University’s Indigenous College, whilst engaging in focused efforts for Indigenous led research.

Dr Simon Wilde is a lecturer with the Southern Cross Business School, based at Southern Cross University's Gold Coast Campus, Australia. Having recently completed his doctorate, his broader research focus is in the areas of marketing (especially challenges faced by NGOs and public sector entities) and general regional development issues.

Adrian Miller is of the Jirrbal people of North Queensland and Professor of Indigenous Research at Griffith University, Australia. Professor Miller has a vast record in researching many areas of health issues that impact Australian Indigenous Peoples and communities. He has Chaired school and community committees that represent the views of Indigenous families and his experience over the past 16 years in higher education has primarily focused on management, leadership, academic program development and teaching.

Professor S. Neyooxet Greymorning is a political anthropologist who has worked in research among Indigenous peoples of the United States, Australia, Canada, Colombia S.A., New Zealand and East Timor. With research interests that include the maintenance and restoration of Native American language, Indigenous sovereignty and contemporary Native American issues, Neyooxet holds positions in Anthropology and Native American Studies as a faculty member at the University of Montana. He is also Adjunct Professor (Division of Research) at Southern Cross University, Australia.

References