

**Beyond Black and White: Transformative  
Learning and Educator Practice in Australian  
Indigenous Studies**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
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## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Susan Jennifer Page

April 2022



## Acknowledgments

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers, Gerty Page, and Mina Stephenson, who were both strong women and to my late mother Pearl Page and my late father Jeff Page who are always with me in spirit.

## **Abstract**

The need for non-Indigenous Australians to be more cognisant of the entangled histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, has reverberated through a range of recent reviews of Australian higher education and policy documents which recommend better understanding of Indigenous Australia grounded in tertiary curricula. This policy emphasis has led to a national commitment to curricula which prepares university graduates to practise more effectively when working with or for Indigenous Australians. Consequently, university graduates will need to think beyond the simple binaries of black and white, which too often impede understanding and practise, to develop deeper understandings of our nation's complex colonial legacy. Given the turbulent history of Aboriginal-settler relations it is inevitable that some learners will come to their study with pre-existing prejudices, and misconceptions. Such learners can find the Australian Indigenous Studies curriculum challenging, as courses of study present perspectives that do not accord with their existing views. Such learners can be labelled by educators as racist or prejudiced. However, Australian Indigenous Studies educators also suggest that learners can experience significant shifts in their thinking, or transformations, during a period of formal Indigenous Studies learning. This qualitative study uses the threshold concepts framework as a theoretical guide to explore such transformation processes, for learners. Threshold concepts are key ideas, not always explicitly taught, which foster a learners ability to think like a discipline expert. Critically, a threshold concept frequently involves troublesome knowledge, conceptualised as occurring in a liminal space in which learners might grapple with a particular disciplinary idea, oscillating between understanding and confusion, before fully attaining the required knowledge. Data collected for the study includes interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners enrolled in Indigenous Studies subjects, from three university sites, Indigenous academics teaching Australian Indigenous Studies, and a group of Aboriginal Elders and Knowledge holders.

Focusing on the threshold concepts notion of liminality as a rite of passage, I outline a process of transformation whereby the study learners separate from the familiarity of their home disciplines to enter the often culturally dissonant Indigenous Studies classroom space. For some students this causes a disorientation which can be challenging but also leads to significant shifts in thinking. Learners in this study experience transformative reorientations not just in the way they understand their discipline but also in how they see

the world and behave in their lives. The student accounts of their learning experiences are compelling, explicitly addressing issues such as resistance and racism. For the educators interviewed for this research, teaching practice was motivated by a desire to see students contribute to enhanced Indigenous community outcomes through their graduate professional practice. The Elders group illuminate a critical juncture between learning and teaching which coalesces through the notion of truth, and the telling of Indigenous stories. I argue that labelling of students as racist or resistant early in their Indigenous Studies learning is counterproductive, reflecting neither the complexity of an individual's experiences nor the potential for transformed shifts in thinking. Instead, I propose a wholistic model for understanding these student transformative learning experiences which can inform teaching practice *and* the preparation of teachers for practice. Returning to the threshold concepts framework I suggest that colonial violence is a threshold concept in Indigenous Studies, opening the gateway for deeper engagement with key disciplinary concepts.

### **Cultural Sensitivity Warning**

This thesis contains the names of Aboriginal people who are deceased. The names used are common in the public domain.

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## List of Acronyms

AIAS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
CRAA	Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs
DVC A	Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic
DVC R	Deputy Vice Chancellor Research
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
RCIADIC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

## List of Publications and Presentations Arising from the Study

### Refereed Papers

Page, S. (2017). The transformative potential of Southern SOTL for Australian Indigenous Studies, *SoTL in the South*, 1(1), 108-113.

Page, S. (2014). Exploring New Conceptualisations of Old Problems: Researching and Reorienting Teaching in Indigenous Studies to Transform Student Learning. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 43(01), 21-30.

A list of refereed papers I led or co-authored during my candidature, and which are aligned but not directly related to the thesis, can be found in Appendix A. Some of the papers are cited in the thesis.

### Conference Presentations

I took the opportunity afforded by conference attendance for work related presentations to also present my developing doctoral study work.

Page, S. (2021, July 7-9) *Rites of Passage in Indigenous Studies*, 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference, London (and online).

<https://thresholdconcepts.home.blog/2021/07/30/rites-of-passage-in-indigenous-studies/>

Page, S. & Sullivan, C. (2020, January 3-7). *Transformative learning in Indigenous Studies: A student and academic perspective*, Hawaii International Conference on Education, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Page, S. (2019, 3–5 July). *Degrees of Knowing: Challenges for Student Learning in Indigenous Studies*, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Conference, Auckland, New Zealand.

Page, S. (2018, November 20). *Beyond Black and White: Liminal learning in Indigenous Studies*. University of Technology Sydney, Indigenous Research Symposium, Sydney, Australia.

Page, S. (2017, November 26-30). *Exploring student learning in Indigenous Studies through overlapping theoretical learning spaces*. Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, Canberra, ACT.

Page, S. (2017, July 24–28). *Beyond Black and White: How students experience learning in Indigenous Studies*. World Indigenous People's Conference on Education, 2017, Toronto, Canada.

Page, S. (2017). *Beyond Black & White: Using the Threshold Concepts Framework to explore student learning in Australian Indigenous Studies*, presentation to the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Colloquium, 24<sup>th</sup> March, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Page, S. (2016, December 27–November). *Academic Conceptions of Threshold Concepts in Introductory Indigenous Studies*. Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Page, S. (2016, June 15-17). *Using the Threshold Concepts Framework to research student resistance; a common dilemma in Indigenous Studies teaching*. 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference, Dalhousie, Canada.

Page, S. (2016, July 4–7). *Using the Threshold Concepts Framework to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies*, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research & Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Fremantle, Australia.

Page, S. (2015, September 21) *Theoretical Learning Spaces: Exploring Threshold Concepts, the Cultural Interface and the Zone of Proximal Development to better understand student learning in Indigenous Studies*. Indigenous Content in Education Symposium, Adelaide, Australia.

Page, S. (2014, July 9–11) *Intersecting and Overlapping Spaces: Combining teacher and student perspectives to identify threshold concepts in Indigenous Australian Studies*. 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial International Threshold Concepts Conference: Threshold Concepts in Practice, Durham, England.



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## Thesis prologue

Early in my academic teaching career, I had a pivotal teaching experience that over the years has become a well-worn anecdote and more recently the subject of deeper analysis. As a relatively inexperienced level A lecturer, I accepted an invitation to deliver a guest lecture – on Aboriginal Australia - to a group of international students. As an Australian Aboriginal person, I (naively) thought this might be a good teaching opportunity. I might not have asked the key questions about my audience that would later become second nature to me. How many students? What do they need to learn? What do they already know? Nevertheless, I diligently prepared a lecture on the rather nebulous topic of Aboriginal Australia to fit the allocated hour in the teaching program. I had planned to allow time for questions and so once I had finished with the prepared material, I opened the floor to questions. Among the questions asked that day was one that has stayed with me. A young woman raised her hand and asked, “I heard that Aborigines sleep with dogs, is that true?” In the seconds that followed, I thought of my own family. When I was a child, there had always been dogs at our house. They certainly came into the house and might even have slept on our beds at times. I knew people who treated their pets as almost human. In my previous career as a nurse, I was familiar with practises in remote Aboriginal communities whereby ‘camp’ dogs slept close to people for warmth. My no doubt clumsy response probably included some or all these thoughts.

It would be an understatement to say that nothing I had experienced in my relatively short academic career had prepared me for this question. While I would later enrol in a postgraduate education program, I had little preparation to teach beyond my degree, my clinical experience and my particular experience of Aboriginality. At the time I was working in an Indigenous centre, with responsibility for Indigenous student support as well as delivering teaching programs, in a major metropolitan university whose academic programs were delivered to largely Indigenous Australian students. My exposure and experience with non-Indigenous students in a higher education setting was limited. Today, Indigenous academics tend to decline this sort of lecture request, unless it links to stimulating curiosity for further formal study. We recognise it is unrealistic to expect to achieve much in terms of student learning in such a short time. Moreover, most Australian universities now have credit bearing subjects through which learners can critically engage with the field of Indigenous Studies. For the purposes of this thesis, however, my response

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is less important than deeper exploration of the question, and to consider what it might tell us about the nature of the students' learning, about difficult questions and about uncomfortable responses. Questions like these can lead to students being called racist and this type of inquiry can be discombobulating or distressing for educators teaching Indigenous Studies content. This scenario reflects three areas related to my study; the disposition of learners, particularly non-Indigenous students, new to Indigenous studies; the unpredictable challenges that teachers of Indigenous Studies can face in their classrooms and the potential for transformative learning experiences whilst students are undertaking learning in Indigenous Studies. The study explores the interconnected experiences of a group non-Indigenous and Indigenous learners and Indigenous educators of Australian Indigenous Studies at university.

## Chapter One Contextualising Australian Indigenous Studies Learning

Many non-Indigenous learners in Australia come to university having had little interaction with Indigenous Australians beyond the school curriculum (Biles et.al., 2016), advertising and media (Mooney et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2013). Non-Indigenous students also profess to having little knowledge of Indigenous Australia (O’Dowd, 2010; Ranzijin et al., 2008; Thackrah & Thomson, 2013). Yet, it is increasingly common for learners studying at Australian universities to encounter the Australian Indigenous Studies curriculum, either in their disciplinary contexts or through elective Indigenous Studies subjects. Non-Indigenous student resistance to this curriculum is an issue that captivates and concerns educators and educational researchers alike (Grogan et al., 2021; Hollinsworth, 2016a; Kickett et al., 2014; O’Dowd, 2012; Winslett & Phillips, 2005). The notion of resistance, described in further detail below, encompasses a range of learner responses to the Indigenous curriculum and is widely used and understood in this context. The literature is largely focused on the majority of Australian university students who are non-Indigenous. Indigenous Australian learners can also come to their Indigenous Studies learning with varying levels of knowledge about Indigenous Australian histories and cultures.

A growing body of literature theorising and characterising learner behaviours signals the challenges for learners and university educators. Notions of ‘white privilege’, ‘white fragility’ (DiAngelo, 2011; Flynn, 2015) or even learners being ‘cray, cray’, referring to suffering from a white neurosis which renders white students emotionally labile (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013), all coined in the international literature on anti-racism education, have taken hold. This terminology reflects observed learner behaviours in the classroom as well as the fraught space of the Indigenous Studies classroom for educators. Overt hostility, anger, silence, and disengagement mark out the resistant student (Gair, 2016; Leane, 2010; Nakata et al., 2012; J. Phillips et al., 2005; Williamson & Dalal, 2007) and are recurring responses to Australian Indigenous Studies curriculum that educators perennially encounter (Asmar & Page, 2009). Teaching Indigenous Studies in this context can be challenging and uncomfortable (Page & Asmar, 2008; J. Phillips et al., 2005) for some academics:

The relationship between learner and educator is rife with emotions that, at times, can leave both parties feeling exhausted and needing to breathe deeply, because of the projection of deficit views [about Aboriginal people] that some students carry with them. (Rosas-Blanch, 2016, p. 10)

However, despite these challenges, educators also see the potential for transformative learning in Indigenous Studies classrooms (Bullen & Roberts, 2018; J. Phillips et al., 2005; Sjoberg & McDermott, 2016). Many Indigenous Studies educators recognise that their students graduate to work in numerous fields that directly or indirectly affect Indigenous Australians (Power et al., 2016; Thorpe & Burgess, 2016). This makes teaching and learning critical.

While there is an emerging empirical literature focusing on learner experiences of undertaking Indigenous Studies (Bullen & Roberts, 2018; Flavell et al., 2013; Thorpe & Burgess, 2016), educator perspectives on student behaviour dominate. Understanding the learner perspective, particularly under challenging circumstances, is vital to teaching well (Brookfield, 1998; Cousin, 2006; O'Dowd, 2012). Inquiry into student learning in Indigenous Studies may help educators to understand better how and what prompts transformative learning. This research grew from a desire to delve more deeply into the student behaviours that, as an educator, I too saw in the classroom. Categorising resistant learner responses to Indigenous Studies course material as white privilege or fragility lends a comforting label and universality to recognisable conduct, but it provides less guidance for how to teach and even less about how to foster transformative learning. The resistant, hostile learner who features in the literature is often the same student who appears in educator anecdotes and tearoom narratives as valuing Indigenous Studies teaching. This research takes up the challenge of understanding the diversity and complexity of student learning by focusing on learning in Indigenous Studies through the experiences of a small group of university students undertaking Indigenous Studies subjects at three Australian universities, enhanced by the perspectives of a group of educators, and further enriched by interviews with a group of Aboriginal Elders and Knowledge holders.

## Exploring learner resistance and prejudice

Tertiary students of Indigenous Studies are often characterised as resistant or even racist (Asmar & Page, 2009; Aveling, 2006; Hollinsworth, 2016a; O’Dowd, 2010, 2012). While these resistant learners are usually few (Thorpe & Burgess, 2016), their presence in classes is challenging for educators (Bullen & Roberts, 2019a; Wolfe et al., 2018) and can be distracting and confusing for other students. Unfortunately, some learners will come to their studies with negative preconceptions of Indigenous Australians (Aveling, 2006; Phillips & Whatman, 2007). These prejudices likely arise because learners enter the field of study simultaneously familiar, and unfamiliar; both knowing and unknowing about Indigenous Australians; depending on their individual social and educational circumstances as well as factors such as their age and whether they grew up in Australia or not. Australian learners will undoubtedly have varying levels of existing understandings of Indigenous Australia derived from their school curriculum (Clark, 2008; Fricker, 2017; Shipp, 2013). The ‘history wars’, stoked in the 1990’s by growing concern about Australian young people’s historical knowledge, entrenched an increasingly polarised view of the country’s past (Clark, 2008). Debates about the place of Aboriginal history in the school curriculum coincided with national celebrations of the 1988 Bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay in 1788, or for Indigenous people, a national protest about the invasion of sovereign lands. Conservative historians and politicians denounced what they characterised as a ‘black armband’ version of history (Blainey, 1993), which they deemed overly sympathetic to Indigenous perspectives and overtly critical of the colonial regime. The arguments continued in the wake of the Royal Commission into the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children, forcibly removed from their families in the name of protection but arguably with the intent of assimilation into the broader population, with considerable disagreement about the validity of the Commission’s findings (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). While there is now mandatory Indigenous curriculum in Australian schools, the ongoing challenges of effective teaching (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012) result in a fragmented curriculum for learners. As well, given the tumultuous history of Aboriginal-settler relations since colonisation (Elder, 1998; Reynolds, 2013) and the ongoing, underlying racial tensions (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), it is inevitable that some learners will come to their studies with pre-existing prejudices.

Not all learners studying at Australian universities were born or schooled here. International learners are also very likely to have some knowledge of Indigenous Australia, garnered through popular culture and big-budget tourism advertising and possibly the experiences of Indigenous peoples in their home country. The success, for example, of major films telling Aboriginal stories, such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002) and stories told by Aboriginal creators, such as Wayne Blair's *Sapphires* (2012) or Warwick Thornton's international award-winning *Samson and Delilah* (2010), both nationally and internationally (Thomas, 2014) suggests potential for widespread engagement with Indigenous Australia. However, it is not just popular media that informs international learners. Multimillion-dollar tourism advertising promotions (Mahadevan, 2018) are designed specifically to draw international interest. Global tourism promotions such as the *Come Walkabout* and the *Where the Bloody Hell Are You?* campaigns included a significant evocation of Indigenous Australia to lure holidaymakers to our shores. Both of these campaigns emphasised traditional Aboriginal culture, with the former drawing on the Baz Luhrmann (2008) film *Australia*, a World War Two romance set on a cattle station in Central Australia featuring a young Aboriginal boy as the narrator, and the latter featuring traditionally painted dancers invoking 40,000 years of history (Pomeroy, 2013). In addition, since the 1990's, there has been an increasing emphasis on Aboriginal-specific tourism, such as visiting an Aboriginal site or being offered a cultural experience, which are particularly popular with overseas visitors (Mahadevan, 2018). This cultural tourism may engender a particular view of Indigenous Australia, which is unlikely to be reflected in classroom teaching. Although interest in Indigenous tourism varies across markets, one study of international visitor demand for Indigenous experiences noted barriers for Chinese visitors undertaking an Indigenous excursion, including safety fears and unease with Aboriginal people, with tour operators suggesting that Chinese travellers have little knowledge of Indigenous Australia (Ruhanen et al., 2015). These subtly negative perceptions are potentially found in our international student populations who, interestingly, are counted in the analyses of numbers of overseas tourists visiting Australia (Pomeroy, 2013). Advertising, or indeed, film, can at best depict fragments of Indigenous culture. As Pomeroy & White (2011) note, such advertising campaigns are driven by non-Indigenous Australians and fail to account for post-colonial power imbalances, atrocities such as deaths in custody, and too often clumsily inappropriate Indigenous culture. It is unsurprising then those international learners sometimes arrive in their

Australian Indigenous Studies classrooms expecting an extension of this marketed cultural tourism.

This chapter provides an overview and contextual background of the research study. First, I outline the motivations that drew me to the project, by locating myself in the study through drawing together both early formative experiences as well as later professional and educational occurrences. Second, I locate the study in the Australian national context, using the educational recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to illustrate the nexus between the colonial past; curriculum and teaching practice; and student learning in Indigenous Studies. Third, I situate the study in the higher education context, illustrating the colonial foundations of Australian universities, which continue to penetrate contemporary institutions, despite the increasingly prominent Indigenous Australian presence in universities. Fourth, I explain the teaching and learning context of the study; specifically, I introduce the threshold concepts framework, which provides the broad conceptual framework for the research. The chapter closes with a brief delineation of the study design and an orientation to the thesis structure.

### **Locating the study in my commitment to transformative learner learning in Australian Indigenous Studies**

My experiences of teaching Indigenous Studies in Australian universities over almost two decades inspired this study, but the catalyst was a chance encounter with a threshold concepts theory specialist at a seminar, which ultimately guided the design of the study. I had been seeking ways to more systematically examine how learners were learning in my classrooms and specifically to better explore how students' understandings changed, or didn't change, over the course of their formal learning. Like many colleagues, I was particularly interested in the idea of 'student resistance', which is inevitably touched upon in countless conversations with colleagues about our teaching. I also came to the study with a lifetime of accumulated experiences that helped shape the way the study evolved.

Utilising an autobiographical lens has allowed me to reflexively illuminate critical events that have influenced both my approach to teaching and to this study (Bainbridge, 2007), recognising that researchers are "active participants in the research process not passive

observers or scribes” (Hertz, 1996, p. 5). Reflecting on our own experiences as learners helps us both understand and explain our preference for particular pedagogies and approaches to teaching (Brookfield 1998). Moreover, reflexivity is understood as a way for researchers to make explicit their prior experiences and knowledge which contribute to both the shaping and the outcomes of research (O’Connor, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Torres Strait Islander<sup>1</sup> scholar Nakata (2012) also cautions that we must “not forget the importance of examining and reflecting on what constitutes and shapes our own thinking” (p. 100). I draw on four examples – my early formative years, a period of professional practise in the health sector, my academic career, and undertaking this doctoral study – to illustrate how my experiences affect my teaching (Brookfield, 1998; Lunn Brownlee et al., 2017) and consequently my research (Henwood, 2008). I use each example to expose the 'epistemic cognition' or the 'internal dialogue' (Feucht et al., 2017) that drives my practice.

## **Formative years**

I identify as Aboriginal and trace my ancestry through my father, his mother, and her mother to Barkindji Country in Western New South Wales (Australia). My father’s family’s story is in many ways typical of colonial history, encompassing removal from Country, resettlement, servitude, and racism. It is also redolent of survival, strength, and striving. My great-grandmother, despite leaving her Country with my white great-grandfather in the late 1800’s or early 1900’s and travelling thousands of kilometres north to Kalkadoon Country in north west Queensland, raised a large family, including my grandmother, in her new situation. My grandmother’s life of service had already begun when my father was born, and he was raised by his (beloved) grandmother and later by educational institutions. My mother’s family is of Scottish and Irish ancestry, descended from free settlers. Both my parents’ families saw the transcendent opportunities afforded by education, and despite their quite different beginnings, they traversed similar paths through boarding school and on to the post-secondary education more widely available in the post-second world war boom period. My parents encouraged a love of learning. A lifelong journey of learning has been a reality rather than a contemporary catch cry for

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<sup>1</sup> Torres Strait Islanders are Indigenous Australians from the Torres Strait Island group located north of the mainland Australian state of Queensland.

me. My earliest memory of institutional education teaching was from pre-school. One of my friends, Mickey, must have been misbehaving, and he was sent outside while the other children had story time. I recall a deep sense of injustice, directed at the educators, that he had been humiliated in that way. Despite this, when I was growing up, my ambition was always the same. I wanted to be a teacher. My parents were both (primary school) teachers, and I guess that was what I knew. My mother particularly shared her love of teaching. She helped me to understand that each child's learning was important, and each had a strength. Through her story of the little boy who lived out of town and could not sit still but could take a tractor engine apart and reassemble it, I came to understand the concept of learner-centredness and the importance of understanding the learner. Learner-centred approaches to teaching are now widely accepted as important to facilitating learning (Kember et al., 2017; Kember & Gow, 1994; McCabe & O'Connor, 2014). My father, who was sent to boarding school at ten years old and was often the only Aboriginal child in his class, took all the things he valued from his own education and applied them in his subsequent teaching practice. The successive small country communities whose children he cast into school plays probably did not understand the way my father used this device to level playing fields – children of all backgrounds joined the play; Aboriginal kids, kids from the outlying properties, children of the local labourers. Someone's farm shed was the venue for one particularly memorable play. I gleaned from overheard adult conversations that not all local families valued this inclusivity. From these models, I learned that education can be about social justice and can have transformative power (Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 1991). I wanted to be a teacher right up until my final year of school when in a streak of rebellion, I decided to 'go nursing'.

## **Nursing**

Hospitals can have negative associations for Indigenous Australians, often intensely so for people from rural and remote areas. Everything from the language to the technology and even the food can be unfamiliar and alien (Einsiedel et al., 2013; Shahid et al., 2011). Miscommunication and misunderstanding often contribute to poorer health outcomes (Dwyer et al., 2014) and a sense of disempowerment (Burnette & Kickett, 2009). Initially, I undertook hospital-based nursing training in Townsville, a small city in northern Australia where racism in professional practice manifested in usual and unusual ways. Later, as a qualified nurse and midwife, working at the midwifery unit at Alice Springs

hospital, which catered to a large Indigenous population, I was appalled and perplexed to find that the practice of segregating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal patients continued in the mid 1980's. Hospital beds for new mothers and their babies in the maternity wing were organised strictly according to race, with non-Aboriginal mothers and infants situated in single suites while Aboriginal mothers and their babies were accommodated in four-bed rooms. The accepted logic was that the Aboriginal mothers preferred to be co-located with other Aboriginal women, which probably had some merit, given that many of those mothers were from remote locations and away from family and community. However, I unwittingly exposed the unwritten rule that non-Indigenous women do not belong with the Aboriginal women.

One day, when on a night shift, I allocated a non-Indigenous woman and her baby to a four-bed bay already occupied by three Aboriginal new mothers. It was the only spare bed in the ward that was cleaned and ready for a new patient. Come morning, senior staff moved the non-Indigenous women to a hastily readied single room, quickly rectifying this 'mistake'. Those practises reflect a deeply ingrained, elegantly justified systemic racism all too common in Indigenous health care delivery (Dwyer et al., 2014; Kelaher et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2020) and reflect a well-established history of segregation practices across Australia (Edmonds, 2012). However, such practices also reflected a health profession's education system not yet concerned about cultural competency or transcultural practice. It was not until many years later, following sustained calls from Indigenous practitioners and scholars, that racism and inequity in practice became topics of pre-service health practitioner education (Bessarab, 2015; Jackson et al., 2013; G. Phillips, 2004; Taylor et al., 2014).

## **Teaching in Higher education**

I came to higher education via a job working as a nurse and educator in an Aboriginal Medical Service, one of a network of Australian Indigenous community-controlled health services, in a regional area of the state of Western Australia, which has a large and diverse Indigenous Australian population. Indigenous health services began in the early 1970s, driven by Indigenous activism and designed to promote the health of Indigenous Australians (Campbell et al., 2017). I worked in the Health Service, supporting the clinical and university education of Aboriginal Health Workers employed by the organisation.

The Health Service took a proactive approach to the education of their Aboriginal Health Workers and my role was to work in the clinic but also to support the training of the Aboriginal Health Workers. This involved spending two-week blocks in Perth doing some classroom teaching at the university where the Aboriginal Health Workers were undertaking degree qualifications in the then popular block-mode delivery model which meant learners came to university for intensive periods of study interspersed with study in their home communities. My professional pathway was leading toward my original aspiration of teaching at this point, although it was still primarily clinical. As a clinician, I also saw first-hand a community suffering from chronic health issues underpinned by inequity and further entrenched by poor housing, unemployment, and racism (Durey, 2010; Eades et al., 2010; Ferdinand et al., 2014). All the medical professionals who worked in the service were non-Indigenous, as were their counterparts at the local regional hospital, although it was the Aboriginal Health Workers who were the critical bridge between the local Yamatji<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal community and health services. This role highlighted how inadequate my own nursing education had been in promoting understanding of the needs of Indigenous communities, the devastating health consequences of dispossession, and the hopeless inadequacy of treatment in the absence of basic amenities such as functional, uncrowded housing (Fisher et al., 2019; Marmot, 2011). I came to understand the critical importance of Indigenous curriculum in health professions' education to address cavernous gaps in practitioner understandings (Manton & Williams, 2021; Power et al., 2016) of the socio-economic underpinnings of ill-health, rather than emphasising gaps in Indigenous health outcomes.

The Western Australia experience led to my second, more substantial, university role, which was teaching Aboriginal Health and Community Development at the University of Sydney. I began as a level A lecturer with just an undergraduate degree and almost ten years of practice experience at a time when Indigenous academics were few, and doctoral-qualified staff even more rare. I quickly realised that my health practice experience did little to prepare me for classroom teaching, and began a master's degree in Health Professions Education, focused on how to develop my teaching, and more importantly, to facilitate student learning. The learners I was teaching at this time were mostly

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<sup>2</sup> The language group name of the local Aboriginal people.

Indigenous Australians, enrolled in a Bachelor of Health Science: Aboriginal Health and Community Development. The degree was also offered via block-mode delivery.

## **Developing Research Experience in Higher Education**

My first research project as an academic focused on the barriers and enablers for Aboriginal learners studying in the degree program. Using a small institutional grant fund, I worked with a team of colleagues to complete a qualitative study with a group of Indigenous learners studying in our Indigenous-targeted Bachelor of Health Science: Aboriginal Health and Community Development. We had noticed a considerable drop-out rate from our degree program and became interested, through informal discussions with our learners, in what helped students to continue studying and what got in the way. A key finding from this study was that newness to study and the unfamiliarity of coming to university were potentially destabilising challenges for learners (Daniel DiGregorio et al., 2000). This small and hardly surprising finding led to a complete change in our orientation program. From this work, I learned many of the basic skills of university research from applying for ethics clearance, collecting, analysing and writing up data, and importantly, about the potential impact of research. This was also where I honed my philosophy of learner-centred teaching.

The next studies I undertook were also collaborative and explored the roles of Indigenous academics working in Australian and New Zealand universities. The first study involved carrying out qualitative survey research with Australian Indigenous scholars working in Indigenous Centres (Asmar & Page, 2009; Page & Asmar, 2008); the second study was a collaboration with a Māori colleague to replicate the original study (Asmar et al., 2009; Mercier et al., 2011); followed by a third study with Indigenous academics working in mainstream discipline areas (Asmar & Page, 2018). While Indigenous scholars working in a range of discipline areas is more common now, the numbers then were small. That first small-scale, qualitative study gave me a window into the work experience of Indigenous colleagues across Australia. While there were a range of divergences across the studies, a common theme was the additional burden of cultural awareness work for Indigenous scholars but also the deep commitment Indigenous scholars have to their educator roles. Across each cohort, there was a feeling that the teaching of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners could ultimately benefit Indigenous communities. This

research helped to grow my understanding of Indigenous teaching, but it also helped to build a scholarly network, and to show me that my own work was not done in isolation. I saw that the complexities of the work were replicated across the nation, and echoed experiences of Indigenous scholars globally. These prior research experiences act as “recursive reverberations” (Clendinin et al., 2012, p. 23) which echo through this study through the accretion of knowledge and skills to this point.

## **Doctoral Studies**

Like some other Indigenous Australian academics, I came to my doctoral studies mid-career, having completed and applied the learning from my master’s degree, undertaking senior university roles and growing my family. The credential is important to me, particularly in a sector landscape where there are now many more doctoral qualified Indigenous staff than the handful of Indigenous PhDs when I first began working in higher education. However, so too was the opportunity to dive deeply into questions of student learning, which had been developing over the course of my academic career. For the past 15 years, I have been teaching Australian Indigenous Studies to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous undergraduate learners. Like many Indigenous educators, I teach because I am committed to the discipline but also because I hope that through my teaching, my students will have a better understanding of Indigenous people, that they will combat racism and work more effectively to enhance outcomes for Indigenous people (Asmar & Page, 2009; Nakata 2007). These lofty ambitions are perhaps more than we should expect from learners. My observation of learners in Indigenous Studies classes is that many students struggle to move beyond simplified binary thinking, and are often impeded by cognitive rigidity (Nakata, 2012) or resort to simplistic binaries of black and white. This kind of thinking can prevent learners from seeing the more complex inter-relationships inherent in the discipline or, for that matter recognising Indigenous agency. As educators, then, our work is underpinned not only by hope but also faith; hope that our students will have transformative learning experiences and faith, as Mezirow (2003) suggests, that this learning “transforms their problematic taken-for-granted frames of reference... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally able to change” (p. 58). My experiences thus far suggest that student learning and educator practice are deeply intertwined in ways that we are yet to fully explore.

## Locating the study in the Australian national context

This study has been undertaken at a time of increasing prominence of Indigenous matters in national and sub-national political discussions that have also spilled into debates about education and higher education more specifically. The recent *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (Referendum Council, 2017), an impassioned plea for recognition of Australia's first peoples in the country's constitution, is echoed by renewed treaty discussions (Hobbs & Williams, 2018) in Australian states such as Victoria (Fitzsimmons, 2016) and (First) nation-building in South Australia (Hemmings et al., 2019). These Indigenous-led political movements and policy shifts connect a lengthy, unbroken Indigenous occupation of Country with a damaging, omnipresent colonial past that continues to reach into the present and threatens to seep into the future. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* arose from an Indigenous designed and led national dialogic process which culminated in a gathering of 250 Indigenous Australian delegates at the 2017 First Nations National Constitutional Convention at Uluru (Fleay & Judd, 2019). Two major recommendations for reform emerged from the Convention. The first, unsurprising as this was the intent of the process, was for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the nation's constitution (Rubenstein, 2019). The second recommendation, though, for a truth-telling<sup>3</sup> process, was unplanned, yet emerged unprompted from the earliest of the twelve national consultation dialogues with Indigenous Australians (Appleby & Davis, 2018). The emphasis on truth-telling was echoed by the Elders I spoke with for this study. This fresh reform agenda is exemplified by the following statements gathered through the regional dialogues (The Uluru Statement, 2022):

In order for meaningful change to happen, Australian society generally needs to “work on itself” and to know the truth of its own history. (Brisbane Regional Dialogue)

Australia must acknowledge its history, its true history. Not Captain Cook. What happened all across Australia: the massacres and the wars. If that were taught in

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<sup>3</sup> The Uluru Statement called for the establishment of a Makarrata Commission with the function of supervising agreement-making and facilitating a process of local and regional truth telling.

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schools, we might have one nation, where we are all together. (Darwin Regional Dialogue)

The first quote suggests that there remains work to be done in relation to truth-telling, while the second connects this truth explicitly to critical historical untruths and overtly to the violence of the early colonial era through the evocation of massacres of Indigenous people. Moreover, the second quote also connects this telling of truth to the formal process of education. The Indigenous Australians contributing to the Uluru Convention saw the exposure of Indigenous truths not just for themselves, but critically “for all Australians, now and through ongoing educational programs, in the times to come” (Appleby & Davis, 2018, p. 504) recognising that our formal education systems have a role to play if the legal process of constitutional reform is to be effective. My research, and more importantly, the study findings, make little sense without recourse to the colonial past, which continues have repercussions in the present. This contextualisation is critical both for educational research and for student learning if we are to forestall the fiction of peaceful settlement (Moreton-Robinson, 2005), which continues to have such a strong hold on the contemporary imagination. My findings suggest that transformative learning for Australian Indigenous Studies learners may hinge on cognisance of a deeper truth of a violent invasion and its ongoing ramifications, just as the Elders proposed.

Without recognising historic violence against Indigenous peoples, it is difficult to understand the apparently invisible forces which continue to underpin modern Australian society. It is difficult for learners who have not experienced it or had the theoretical means to consider it, to understand the ways in which whiteness accrues and accretes privilege (Carr, 2008; DiAngelo, & Sensoy, 2010; Hikido & Murray, 2016), not simply through hard work or intellect but through systematic and ongoing oppression of Indigenous Australians (Bond et al., 2018). Esteemed Aboriginal poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal notes, “let no-one say the past is dead, the past is within us” (Noonuccal 1976, p. 94). However, the past is not a single entity, equally understood as a universal truth. There are multiple strands, experienced differently by individuals and groups and subject to refashioning, as evidenced by the history wars above and what anthropologist William Stanner (1979), in his landmark Boyer lecture series, called *The Great Australian Silence*, referring to an apparently deliberate forgetting of Indigenous Australians in the national

narrative so pronounced that it has progressed to a nation-wide “cult of forgetfulness” (p.214). Stanner (1979) deployed the metaphor of a window so positioned as to occlude a particular part of the landscape, wilfully obstructing the view of Indigenous Australia. Recognition of the past and the weight given to various aspects of history is deeply contested in Australia. As a nation, we continue to revere ANZAC<sup>4</sup> Day, a day which commemorates a disastrous, deadly campaign of the First World War and upon which cherished national traits, such as mateship and fairness, are sustained. As this research suggests, this forgetfulness continues. As I talked to students about their learning in Indigenous Studies it was clear that the things we don’t know or have forgotten are amongst the most challenging of learnings.

The vast archive of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), a landmark inquiry into the deaths of 99 Aboriginal people while being held in police custody, is a useful way to illustrate ongoing colonial injustice whilst maintaining a focus on education. Amongst the many recommendations of the Royal Commission directed at the judicial and custodial institutions, are a small cluster of instructions relevant to higher education and the professionals that universities educate.

### **The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: a slow burn for educational change**

More than 30 years ago, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) called for better education of non-Indigenous people in relation to Indigenous Australian history and culture (Rowse, 1992). Royal Commissions are formal public inquiries (Gilligan, 2002; Stark, 2019) established to investigate perceived failures of public administration or to examine a major crisis (Pascoe, 2010). A royal commission has wide-ranging power to gather evidence and produce publicly available reports and recommendations (Pascoe, 2010; Prasser, 2006). The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC) investigated the circumstances of the deaths in custody of 99 Aboriginal people, spanning the decade of the 1980’s, generating 339 recommendations in five volumes of reportage, including a distinct report for each individual case (Charles, 2017; Cunneen, 2010). To read the commission documents is to

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<sup>4</sup> Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

witness first-hand how the invisible hand of colonialism reaches from the past into the present and the future (through the subsequent deaths). In each case, individuals appear to act on their own volition, and yet the collated reports expose the deeply entrenched structural racism that seems to be invisible to the largely white authorities involved in the custodial cases. The invisibility of racism is not surprising given there is often a reluctance to discuss racism (Nelson, 2015) or the impacts of racism in key areas such as education (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Moodie et al., 2019) and health (Bourke et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2004).

In a decisive statement in the early chapter on history, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report notes regarding colonial history:

what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people; it is little known to non-Aboriginal people and it is a principal thesis of this report that it must become more known” (Johnston, Chapter 1.4.1<sup>5</sup>).

The intervening years have not made this statement any less relevant, as the comments from the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* above attest. The Royal Commission report goes on to outline a history of the Australian frontier that begins with land takeover without formal agreements or compensatory mechanisms, compounded by the loss of access to existing food sources or future economic opportunity. Failed policies of Protection, Assimilation, and even Reconciliation predicated on entrenched notions of white racial superiority are implicated in subsequent loss of community cohesion. Emphasising the widespread nature of this racialism, the Commissioner notes:

...for a complex of reasons the non-Aboriginal population has, in the mass, been nurtured on active and passive ideas of racial superiority in relation to Aboriginal people and which sits well with the policies of domination and control that have been applied (Johnston, 1.4.12).

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<sup>5</sup> The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody documents are now fully available online. The numerals here indicate the chapter, chapter section and chapter sub-section for ease of retrieval and cross checking. <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/>

Finalised in 1991, the report acknowledged the resilience and agency of Indigenous Australians and foreshadowed hope for a more positive future based on robust anti-discrimination legislation and changing community and political attitudes (Johnston, 1.4.18). What Commissioner Johnston would make of the more than 400 additional Aboriginal deaths in judicial custody (The Guardian, 2021), many of them violent, since that final report was tabled, it is only possible to conjecture. What is evident, is that the gaps in professional service and higher education provision remain an area for continued work, making the findings of this study of relevance.

The commissioners made a strong connection between the circumstances of the 99 Indigenous Australians who died in custody and the deep, discriminatory, and damaging ignorance of many of the professionals who encountered the individuals whose cases were examined. While the Royal Commission did not suggest culpability in any of the cases, the report noted a pattern of systemic antipathy and underlying racism contributing to the deaths. The five volumes of documents delve deeply into the obscure crevices of underlying contributions to the deaths, cataloguing inadequacies in employment and housing as well as policing and custodial care. Amongst the wide-ranging and lengthy set of the recommendations related to the criminal and juvenile associated justice system were a group of recommendations related to education in general and higher education specifically (Johnston, 1991) - personnel as well as health and education professionals. The cluster of recommendations with relevance for higher education relates largely to the professionals that universities educate. Poor management of health problems was an issue for several of the people whose cases were considered by the Commission. Recommendations designed to promote better health suggested the need for improved preservice (and ongoing professional development) of health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals (Recommendation<sup>6</sup> 247). This recommendation ranged from enhanced teaching of the cultural, historical and socioeconomic circumstances of Indigenous Australians (R247a); to effective communication (R247e); and to education focused on the management of unusual, life-threatening conditions (R247f). Better training of health professionals in relation to

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<sup>6</sup> Recommendations is henceforth abbreviated to R, for ease of reading.

negative stereotypes regarding Indigenous people's use of alcohol and other drugs was also endorsed (R255). Recommendations regarding the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in preservice education of schoolteachers was also addressed (R295) and the inclusion of juvenile justice professionals (R237) widened the circle of areas related to university education. Such recommendations laid out clearly the critical value of Indigenous Studies education in university degrees, particularly in the professions, issuing a clarion call to institutions to meet their requirements for the public good.

Extending into non-health or education areas, the Commission also specifically addressed an ongoing issue, Indigenous representation in the media. Recommendation 207a urges institutions offering journalism courses:

- a. Ensure that courses contain a significant component relating to Aboriginal affairs thereby reflecting the social context in which journalists work; and
- b. Consider, in consultation with media industry and media unions, the creation of specific units of study dedicated to Aboriginal affairs and the reporting thereof.

While these recommendations relate to specific professions and disciplines, the directive that government employees who work in service delivery for Indigenous Australians or live in locations with significant Indigenous populations (R210) also have an education in Indigenous history and culture expands the mandate exponentially. Presumably, many government employees are likely to have degrees in a wide variety of fields, suggesting a need for Indigenous content in all discipline areas. Finally, a set of suggestions in chapter 33 of the final report outlined a range of possible options for increasing the numbers of Indigenous people entering and completing tertiary education (33.2.5), including bridging courses, off-campus and alternative modes of study, and the support of Indigenous support centres in universities. Also included were suggestions such as auditing university curricula for the presence of racist content, scoping the possibilities for incorporating Indigenous perspectives across all curricula, and developing specific Indigenous elective and core units (33.2.5). A call for non-Indigenous Australians to be more cognisant of the entangled histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has subsequently reverberated through a range of more recent higher education reviews and policy documents (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Universities Australia,

2017) which continue to recommend a better understanding of Indigenous Australia grounded in tertiary curricula.

What the commission's findings made abundantly clear was that modern Australia is inextricably tied to its colonial past in ways that are not necessarily evident to the majority of non-Indigenous Australians. Yet these bonds are felt keenly, and sometimes violently by Indigenous Australians long after the colonial period has apparently ended. This misalignment of understanding was made apparent by the respondents to the *Uluru Statement of the Heart* consultation delegates noted earlier. For the purposes of this thesis, the educational recommendations of the commission provide a useful mechanism for a necessary exploration of coloniality, helping to locate the study in a broader historical context whilst maintaining a focus on higher education and learning. As I show later in the thesis, this context is critical to the study participants, although in different ways for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents.

In the section below, I examine in more detail the cases of one Aboriginal man and one Aboriginal woman who died in custody to illuminate the deep, distributed roots of colonial history. Well documented cases like John Pat's, which appeared in the RCIADIC final report, and the hundreds of subsequent Aboriginal deaths in police custody, illustrate ignorance of the ongoing, widespread, systemic issues for which tertiary education is seen as potentially corrective. The first, John Pat, was included in the 1991 findings of the Royal Commission. The case of Ms. Dhu is a more recent custodial death which illustrates well the significant gap in the implementation of the recommendations of the RCIADIC given the shocking negligence evident in her treatment (Whittaker, 2018). What follows may be uncomfortable reading; necessarily so, both because of the topic and the selected details. Colonialism has been brutal, and its aftermath cruel to Indigenous Australians in obvious ways, such as theft of land and massacres, as well as less obvious ways, encompassed by ongoing socio-economic disadvantage and sometimes callous disregard from professionals representing national authorities. The discomfort for the reader may not be dissimilar to the discomfort that learners experience as they begin to learn in Indigenous Studies.

## **Coercion and collusion: the death of John Pat**

The case of the death of John Pat encapsulates three issues of importance for this thesis; namely truth, story, and time. Buttressing the call for a royal commission by Aboriginal people and their allies, was a fierce desire for the truth of the circumstances surrounding the deaths to be told to the nation, along with a mechanism to account for what was seen as the systematic murder of incarcerated Aboriginal men and women (Marchetti, 2005b). The violent death of John Pat, in police custody, proved to be the catalyst for action that led, in 1987, to the establishment of a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Blue, 2017; Purdy, 1994). The Commission's findings noted particularly that the police have been enforcers of colonial rule since the early days of the colony (Grabosky, 1988). The case of John Pat, while not unique, is indicative of the temporal connection between the past and present.

The Commission documents, in setting the context for the death of John Pat, describe the rural town of Roeburn, in Western Australia, as one might imagine the 'wild west'. The social life of the town revolved around two hotels with an over-zealous police force, certain of their duty and right to actively police Indigenous behaviours. Arrest rates, examined over a three-month period, largely related to drunkenness or drinking-related offences, indicated that a significant proportion of the population had been arrested twice, a figure described as "monstrous" (Johnston, 1991a, 4.3 para 2). The town was:

... characterised by saturation policing. In 1983 eight officers and two police aides were stationed in the town. The nearby 'white' town of Wickham had half as many police for twice the population. Indeed, the regional centre, Karratha, with a population of over 8,000 had only fourteen officers. (Grabosky, 1988, p.89)

The town was not unlike other racially divided towns across the nation and similar to the areas where some of the learner participants of this study either grew up or still call home. These are areas characterised by a history of white surveillance of Aboriginal people and overregulation of Aboriginal lives (White, 1997). They are places where the template for race relations was forged generations ago. Non-Indigenous Australians from areas like this bring that socialisation with them to university, and it can be the cause of considerable angst.

John Pat's arrest and subsequent death occurred when a group of off-duty police officers engaged a group of Aboriginal men, including the youth, Pat, in a fight as they were all leaving a local hotel. That a group of off-duty police felt able to start a fight with a group of Aboriginal men and youths and assault them in full view of witnesses attests to their sense of power, righteousness, and brazenness in their certainty that there would be no consequences. Further assaults in broad daylight occurred as the Aboriginal men were being removed from a police van to the local 'lockup'. Witnesses and the victims alike describe brutal assaults that resulted in one man being hospitalised for a week. Sixteen-year-old John Pat was not so lucky. Shortly after he arrived at the local lockup, he was found dead in his cell. The coronial report catalogued extensive and horrific injuries to Pat's head, and torso, compounded by devastating internal injuries (Johnston, 1991a, 5.2). Despite these injuries, police personnel charged with the manslaughter of John Pat were ultimately acquitted by an all-white jury (Purdy, 1994).

### **Royal Commission Recommendations as Remedy**

The royal commissioners saw higher education as one place where reform could lead to wider societal change and an opportunity to address social inequity and entrenched racism. Indeed, since that time, there have been many reforms in higher education in relation to both improving access and participation for Indigenous Australians and improving non-Indigenous people's understandings of Indigenous histories and cultures (discussed in further detail below). Translating recommendations into implementation and action has potential barriers at many levels, from political requirements of governments, lack of funding, and front-line service delivery resistance to clumsily devised or too-prescriptive recommendations that translate poorly to policy (Stark, 2019). In the case of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, there were cross-jurisdictional responsibilities for implementation shared by both state and federal governments. A comprehensive review of the recommendations of the Royal Commission, though, casts some doubt on the level of implementation of the recommendations (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all the recommendations, below I consider three of the recommendations relevant to this study as examples. The three recommendations relate to journalism, pre-service teacher education, and health education and training.

The recommendation that journalism courses include significant components on Aboriginal Affairs (R207a) has yet to be fully implemented. The Deloitte Review (2018) noted that of the six states and two territories, there were only three reports of full implementation (South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory); three further reports of partial implementation (Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory); and two reports of no implementation (Tasmania and New South Wales). The partial implementation noted for Victoria was generous given that the state had not “implemented any specific policies or programs that relate directly to journalism or media training content” (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018) but rather had reported on general commitments to Indigenous engagement in higher education. While there has been considerable growth in Indigenous media, such as *Indigenous X*<sup>7</sup> and small but growing numbers of Indigenous Australian journalists or authors writing for mainstream media (see for example, Lorena Allam for the Guardian or Brooke Boney for Australian commercial television), there remains a problem with mainstream journalism that continues to negatively characterise Indigenous Australians (Waller, 2010), including racial stereotyping (Sweet et al., 2014) and the framing of Indigenous health, for example, “through the narrow lenses of crisis, failure, individual responsibility and depravity” (McCallum & Waller, 2017, p. 110). Journalism schools in Australian universities remain largely populated by non-Indigenous learners with little experience or knowledge of Indigenous Australians, which can lead to fear of making errors or giving offence to Indigenous people (Stewart et al., 2012).

Conversely, the recommendation related to pre-service teacher education and the need for initial teacher education programs to include courses on Aboriginal history and perspectives (R 295) is said to be fully implemented through a combination of professional body standard requirements for teacher registration and through the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy, which provides for monitoring of the specific teacher standards. The successful implementation of this important recommendation, which has specific relevance for university education, should be cause for optimism. However, there remains an incongruity between the policy expectations and the capability of Initial Teacher Education providers to prepare graduates for effective

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<sup>7</sup> Indigenous X is an Indigenous owned and operated media, consultancy, and training organisation.

practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Consequently, new graduates are less comfortable or confident teaching in schools where there are a significant number of Indigenous learners or teaching an Indigenous curriculum (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Mayer et al., 2015), despite these being two areas in which graduating teachers should be competent.

The recommendation for better education and training of health personnel (R247) is also noted to be fully implemented through a strategic and practical web of plans such as *Closing the Gap*, a formal national collaboration between governments and Indigenous Australians, which sets annual targets to improve equity for Indigenous peoples and communities (Commonwealth of Australia, n.d), and national health plans and resources such as the *Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health 2016–2026* (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, 2016). In Australia, most health registering authorities (for example, those for doctors, nurses and midwives, and allied health professionals) have mandated Indigenous curriculum requirements for pre-service education. Yet, more than two decades after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody, the findings of the inquest into the death, in 2014, of a young Yamatji woman, known for cultural reasons as Ms. Dhu, are both instructive and deeply troubling. Deep flaws in health, health education, and the media are evident in this case.

At 22 years old, Ms. Dhu died slowly and painfully in police custody in rural Western Australia, finally succumbing to the combined effects of septicaemia and pneumonia resulting from a domestic violence inflicted rib injury (Fogliani, 2015). For two days following her arrest for unpaid fines, Ms. Dhu had been attempting to get health care, but a prior history of drug abuse led the hospital staff to characterise her as having ‘behavioural issues’ and the police to assume she was ‘faking it’ to gain attention (Klippmark & Crawley, 2018, p. 696) despite the young woman begging for assistance and writhing in pain over long periods. That Ms. Dhu was attention-seeking rather than actually ill was reinforced amongst the judicial and health professionals “through eye-rolls and offhand comments, through notes jotted on medical records” (Blue, 2017, p. 300) and by professionals whose actions contravened their own codes of conduct and policies and were described by the coroner as “unprofessional and inhumane” (Fogliani, 2015, p.

83). The language of the coroner's final summary fails to even begin to capture the grotesque images—released to the public at the insistence of her family—of Ms Dhu's third and final trip to the local hospital, widely described as being dragged, in handcuffs, out of her cell and down a corridor “like a dead kangaroo” (Whittaker, 2018, paragraph, 1). The coroner's assessment was scathing, characterising police behaviour as inhumane, unprofessional, and reflecting poorly on the Western Australian Police Service; and indicating that the hospital staff provided substandard care (Klippmark & Crawley, 2018). Yet, despite coroner Fogliani describing the death of Ms Dhu as “‘unfortunate’ some 25 times, ‘regrettable’ 11 times, ‘sad’ 12 times” (Whittaker, 2018), she was perplexed as to why people might behave in this way (Klippmark & Cawley, 2018). It seems that neither unconscious bias nor institutional racism (Cunneen, 2019) were matters the coroner considered. Despite over two decades of work on Indigenising health curricula, there remains considerable work to be done in tertiary education to ensure that non-Indigenous professionals can work effectively with Indigenous Australians and to ensure the effectiveness of Indigenous Studies education. This study, exploring the potential for transformative learning for students undertaking learning in Indigenous Studies, has considerable relevance for tertiary graduates. More effective teaching (and learning) of Indigenous Studies may provide some remedy to the racism that Indigenous Australians experience, particularly in service provision, where the effects are critical.

### **Locating the Study in the Australian Higher Education context**

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the first universities were established in the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, the colonisation of what was then known as New Holland was well underway. Despite patterns of Aboriginal resistance and white reprisal (Reynolds, 2006), the townships of Sydney and Melbourne were established and developing. At the same time, Aboriginal populations, particularly in the South-East of the country, were diminishing through a combination of introduced disease, frontier violence, including massacres, and a declining birth rate (Ryan, 2010). The discovery of gold in the early 1850's meant an influx of immigrants, with further land pressure, and brought new wealth to the colony, while the pastoral frontier was pushing relentlessly north and west. Dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their traditional land occurred as the inexorable thirst for land grew and Aboriginal people were subsequently drawn into the pastoral workforce as unwaged labour, building the wealth of white landowners

(Gallen & Gleeson, 2018; McGrath, 1995). A British colony was yet to be established in North Queensland (the colony was established in 1861), although incursions for the purposes of exploiting natural resources, such as sandalwood, were already occurring prior to a formal colony being established (Loos, 1982). The colonies were building their own power bases in the lead-up to the eventual federation in 1901 (Atkinson, 2013).

## **Australian Universities as colonial institutions**

University education in Australia, first established in the 1850s, developed from a small number of elite institutions designed to educate colonial leaders (Forsyth, 2014), to now encompass 43 universities catering to an increasingly diverse range of domestic and international learners (Gale, 2015). The University of Sydney (1850) and the University of Melbourne (1853) were modelled on British universities and provided the template for the other institutions that followed (Davis, 2017; O'Donoghue, 2009). There were two key differences, particularly from the two key English institutions, Oxford and Cambridge Universities; these two foundation Australian universities were to be secular and publicly funded (Davis, 2017; North, 2016). What paltry secondary schooling there was in the colonies at the time was dominated by competing religious groups, and the founders of both the universities in both Sydney and Melbourne were eager to avoid that entanglement (North, 2016). Moreover, the entry requirements for these institutions were intended to be more egalitarian and not based on religious or class requirements (Forsyth, 2014). However, the pool of available candidates who had the requisite secondary schooling and could afford university fees and associated costs was small and limited to the wealthy (Tully & Whitehead, 2009). A surer path at the time to traverse class boundaries would more likely have been found in the pursuit of pastoral or mineral prosperity.

The tendency to fairness of opportunity was tempered by a concurrent desire by those championing the advent of university education to raise the “intellectual tone of society” and to “serve as a check on society's baser instincts” (Gascoigne, 1996, p. 22). Despite a lack of popular support from colonists (Selleck, 1999) and fuelled by gold and mineral wealth, the incipient elite set out to “transplant the roots of Britain's intellectual heritage in alien lands far from home” (Tully & Whitehead, 2009, p. 2). Those colonists supporting the establishment of universities in Australia were eager to move away from their penal

origins and join other civilised colonies with universities, such as America. At a more practical level, the colony was reliant on Britain for skilled professionals such as doctors, and lawyers and universities would begin to address that lack (North, 2016; Selleck, 1997). For similar reasons, the professoriate for the new universities came from Britain, attracted by the opportunity for rapid promotion and the promise of good wages (Pietsch, 2010; Selleck, 1999). Further cementing the reproduction of British education in the colony, Tully and Whitehead (2009) explicitly compare the initial professors who came from England to staff the universities to Christian missionaries, calling them “nineteenth century missionaries of high culture” (p. 4). Furthermore, Pietsch’s (2010) detailed study of the founding professors at the University of Sydney indicates those first appointments were almost exclusively born in Britain, particularly in Scotland (p. 382), which continued until the 1920’s when the balance finally shifted to Australian-born staff (p. 381). Pietsch notes that:

The marked dominance of British and native-born professors in both Sydney and Toronto, and the absence of other English-speaking nationals such as Americans and other colonials suggests that national identity was also a filter which affected appointment. It indicates the existence of independent axes of migration between these countries and Britain. (Pietsch p. 383)

This hiring practice suggests the tendrils of colonial influence were lengthy and enduring, continuing to have influence in Australian universities well into the twentieth century.

The University of Sydney, in an institutional news article about the university’s foundation, proudly notes that it was established on the lands of the Cadigal people of the Eora nation (University of Sydney News, 2020). Today, this acknowledgement is appropriate but also disingenuous; a discursive sleight of hand which draws a temporal connection between the institution’s beginnings and the Cadigal people, where it is unlikely such a connection existed, and certainly not as a source of pride. Recognising the traditional lands of Indigenous Australians is now an expected norm, and yet to recognise traditional custodianship without discussion about the theft of land is perhaps an example of why Quandamooka scholar Moreton-Robinson (2011) calls universities sites of “epistemic violence” (p. 428). The importance of this statement of recognition to the university is underlined by its inclusion in one of two sentences in larger font which

introduce the article. I use this example not to single out the University of Sydney—it would not be difficult to find such examples on the websites of most other Australian universities—but to demonstrate a different kind of temporal connection; namely, the ongoing connection of universities to processes of colonisation. It is in this context that learning and teaching of Indigenous Studies occurs, deeply enmeshed in an invisible institutional colonial history and reflected, for example, in learner narratives of uncertainty when faced with Indigenous Studies as a topic; Indigenous classmates; and Indigenous educators.

### **Indigenous Australian Participation in Higher Education**

While the focus of this study is on student learning in Indigenous Studies in higher education, it is difficult to separate contemporary practices in higher education from the development and origins of Indigenous people's participation in education in Australia without perpetuating silence and papering over of beliefs and policies that imbue the current context. There is a genealogy of practice and a suite of hard-won gains, which, like the long-forgotten colonial genesis of universities, underpin both the discipline of Indigenous Studies and the teaching praxis of Indigenous academics. The past is something Indigenous Australians are often encouraged to forget (Moreton-Robinson, 2005; 2009), but as Aboriginal educator Professor Jeannie Herbert indicates:

...it is essential to recognise and accept that, from an Aboriginal Australian perspective, the impact of the past is something people have to deal with every day in their role as students or in their work as educators. (Herbert, 2012, p. 96)

Herbert (2012) further suggests that Australians of all backgrounds should know the truth about Indigenous histories, noting that it is “only by knowing and owning this past” (p.96) that the present can be fully understood. The foundations of formal, western education for Indigenous Australians and an examination of Indigenous participation in higher education illustrate the historical context and current constraints in which this research occurs.

Indigenous education in Australia was shaped by the widely propagated colonial notion of white superiority and Indigenous inferiority (Moreton-Robinson, 2005; Reynolds,

2009) and nineteenth century perceptions of Indigenous Australians as savages in need of civilising and Christianising (Burrige & Chodkiewicz, 2012; González & Colangelo, 2010; Welch, 1988). Colonisation disrupted existing forms of education and living, which had equipped Indigenous Australian children with skills to survive and flourish in their socio-geographic circumstances. The British invaders saw an unruly and untamed landscape sparsely populated by a disorganised people (Smithers, 2009), a perception from which it has been difficult to recover, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Early school education experiences for Aboriginal children occurred in Mission schools, as religious orders took the opportunity to proselytise and instil Western values and gender roles (Jensz, 2012). Access to government schools improved during the 1870s, only to become more restrictive in the 1880s, with increasing punitive actions during the Protection and Assimilation eras (Burrige & Chodkiewicz, 2012). By this time, the educational emphasis for Indigenous children was on training for domestic and pastoral service and assimilation into the lower ranks of the broader white society (Reynolds, 2009).

While the 1880 Public Education Act made schooling compulsory for Aboriginal children to the age of 12, it raised the fears of white families and by the early 1900's, a policy of exclusion of Aboriginal children from schools upon the request of white parents (Reynolds, 2009, p.86) was passed. Still unable to manage the growing problem of unschooled Aboriginal children, the 1915 amendment to the New South Wales 1909 Aborigines Protection Act, reflecting similar policy across the nation, further entrenched the widespread powers of the Protection Board to remove Aboriginal children from their families, allowing that:

The Board may assume full control and custody of the child of any aborigine, if after due inquiry it is satisfied that such a course is in the interest of the moral and physical welfare of such child. The Board may thereupon remove such child to such control and care as it thinks best. (Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, 1915, p.122)

The disastrous chain of intergenerational trauma unleashed by the thousands of subsequent child removals is well documented (Barta, 2008; Read, 1998; Rigney, 1998). However, what was considered best for Indigenous children, having been removed from

their families, was often questionable. Povey (2020) for example, in her intricate history of western education at Moola Bulla station in Western Australia, details both the experiences of stolen children and the deception of Aboriginal families who were promised a western education for their children, when in reality the children were largely used as unpaid labour. The expectation was that the children were not capable of advanced learning. As Torres Strait Islander scholar Nakata (2007) indicates, “until the 1950’s it was not uncommon to express the position that Australia’s Indigenous people reached a point of intellectual development around adolescence where they could progress no more” (p.155). The adolescence deployed as the benchmark here is clearly white. The processes of colonisation actively dislocated the ongoing mechanisms of socialisation and education, which effectively prepared Indigenous Australian children to live and mature to adulthood in their environment and society.

This failure of Indigenous Australians to ‘measure up’ connects past practises of exclusion from education, various policies of protection and assimilation with current standardisation techniques which consistently compare Aboriginal people’s outcomes in schooling and higher education to their non-Indigenous counterparts. This systematic reporting of educational and other socio-economic outcomes is designed to hold governments to account. However, the failure to meet intended benchmarks risks entrenching negative and deficit perceptions of Indigenous Australians (Biddle et al., 2017). Such benchmarks also fail to account for nuances in Indigenous communities’ aspirations for education and the benefits those communities perceive to flow from education (Herbert, 2002; Schwab, 1998).

## **Locating the Study in the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Field**

### **The Threshold Concepts Framework**

Threshold concepts are said to be the ‘jewels in the crown’ of a curriculum; the critical ideas that learners need to comprehend to fully grasp the discipline or to think like discipline experts (Land et al., 2006). Meyer and Land’s (2003) original conception of a threshold concept had five defining characteristics: *transformative*, *irreversible*, *integrative*, *bounded*, and *troublesome*. A threshold concept would most likely be transformative, by leading to a significant change in learner thinking; *irreversible*,

because once a concept is fully grasped it is usually impossible to shift back to the earlier way of thinking, *integrative*, as the concept helps learners to draw connections between ideas in a discipline but also *bounded*, as each concept will have an end point beyond which new concepts must be learned (Meyer & Land, 2003). Critically, a threshold concept also frequently involves troublesome knowledge, which causes students to struggle to understand the concept (Meyer & Land, 2006; Perkins, 2006; 2008). These features differentiate threshold concepts from more tangible knowledge in a discipline, for example, learning a formula or memorising a set of dates. Two additional characteristics, *discursiveness* and *reconstitutive*, were added to the original five criteria as threshold concepts research developed (Land, 2011). *Discursiveness* relates to the propensity of a learner's language to change as they cross disciplinary concept thresholds (Flanagan & Smith, 2008). Changes in learner understandings of themselves as a result of understanding threshold concepts are said to be *reconstitutive* (Land et al., 2010).

One of the advantages of the threshold concepts framework as a means of exploring student learning is that while the framework is explicitly focused on student learning, it is always grounded in a disciplinary context (Cousin, 2006) and also recognises the critical role of the educator in introducing learners to previously inaccessible ways of understanding (Biesta, 2013). More general theories of learning such as 'transformative learning' (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1991) or 'surface' and 'deep learning' (Marton & Saljo, 1976) are primarily focused on students and their learning regardless of discipline, although more recent research has applied the approach in disciplinary contexts (Case & Marshall, 2004; Platow et al., 2013). In contrast, threshold concepts are deeply connected to their disciplinary contexts, arising as much from the particular subject matter as from students' approaches to learning. Examples of identified threshold concepts include the notion of the 'other' in the humanities (Cousin, 2006a); 'caring' in the health professions (Clouder, 2005); or 'voice' in higher degree research (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Consequently, research using the threshold concepts framework can simultaneously focus on both educators and curriculum, as well as students and their learning. This disciplinary contextualisation is particularly useful for scholars who develop and deliver curricula that are specific to their area of expertise and interest.

I was first introduced to threshold concepts at the 2010 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference and was struck by the idea of there being discipline specific concepts, in particular tacit ideas, which educators might not explicitly teach, but which are critical to learners' mastery of the discipline. It was not until I attended a seminar given by Erik Meyer, one of the originators of the threshold concepts framework, in 2012, that I really engaged with the idea. My initial thoughts centred on two diametrically opposed responses. First, I wondered if this were not a case of the 'emperor's new clothes'. As it happens, I was not the first to think this (Atherton, 2008; Delaney, 2012), as others had raised questions about the apparent lack of reference to the broad learning literature. My second response, however, was that this framework might be very useful in examining student learning in Indigenous Studies. As outlined earlier, my experience teaching Indigenous Studies over many years suggests that many learners begin their Indigenous Studies learning with negatively stereotyped thinking about Indigenous Australians or conversely, with a polarised sense that black is good and white is bad. In either case, the learners seem to struggle to think in complex ways about the ongoing realities of colonisation (Nakata, 2006). I saw the potential for enhancing teaching of the discipline and ultimately improving learners' ability to apply that knowledge as graduates, recognising the student experience of struggle in Indigenous Studies learning. My sense was that the threshold concept framework might illuminate our understanding of the commonly noted 'resistance' and 'guilt' (Pedersen & Barlow, 2008; Sjoberg & McDermott, 2016; Thorpe & Burgess, 2016) and to move beyond those static labels to support our learners to achieve genuine transformation.

I was particularly taken by the idea of liminality. Drawing parallels with ethnographic research on life stage rituals and rites of passage such as adolescence or funerary rites (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960), Meyer & Land (2005) advanced the notion of learning as a liminal space. They conceptualised the struggle associated with troublesome knowledge as occurring in a liminal space in which learners might grapple with a particular idea, oscillating between understanding and confusion before fully attaining the required knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005; 2006). While the space is metaphoric, there are a range of learner behaviours associated with liminality, including hostility, regurgitation, and mimicry (Meyer & Land, 2005; Zepke et al., 2013). There is also a temporal dimension, with the implication that mastery of difficult concepts may

take varying periods of time (Hoadley et al., 2015; O'Mahony et al., 2014). This temporal dimension adds further complexity, as the grasping of a concept may differ from student to student in a class context (Bradley et al., 2015; Heading & Loughlin, 2018; Park & Light, 2009).

The idea of troublesome knowledge, explored through the notion of liminality, is particularly pertinent. For this study, there are two key ideas in relation to liminality: counter-intuitiveness and tacit knowledge. Learners may find a threshold concept difficult to grasp because the concept is counter-intuitive to their prevailing understandings (Perkins, 1999). For example, undergraduate management students found it counter-intuitive that theories developed decades ago would be relevant to contemporary companies (Wright & Gilmore, 2012). American students of geography also found it counter-intuitive that legal Mexican immigrants sending funds back to families in Mexico could be beneficial to their own country by strengthening and stabilising the country of origin, as they struggled to grasp the concept of remittance (Fouberg, 2013). In addition, learners may have existing tacit understandings which are so deeply ingrained as to be not immediately evident to them (Gertler, 2003; Johnson et al., 2002; Tsoukas, 2011). For example, university learners in the United States completing studies in youth work struggle to grasp structural racism, having come to their studies already inculcated in the “national rhetoric of a “colorblind American Dream,” in which “everyone has the same chance to achieve, and racism is restricted to individual acts of bigotry” (Atherton et al., 2008, 10). Similarly, the legacy of colonialism is often so profoundly inscribed into everyday Australian and international worldviews that it can be challenging to unsettle and unsettling for the challenged. My aim here is not to validate or deny racism but rather to suggest that there may be implications for teaching and learning because this knowledge, sometimes expressed as beliefs and values, is not always clear in the learner’s conscious view. Exposing these unconscious views is likely to be important for transformative learning (Boyd & Myers, 1998) and for grasping Indigenous Studies disciplinary expertise. The threshold concepts framework, through the notions of tacit, counter-intuitive, and troublesome knowledge, creates a mechanism for deeper consideration of student’s ignorance and prejudice and how it affects learning.

## **The Study Design**

This study uses the threshold concepts framework (Meyer & Land, 2005) to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies. Specifically, I use the rites of passage element of the threshold concepts framework (Meyer & Land, 2005; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015) to illustrate a temporal, sequential learning trajectory, from preliminal, through liminal and post-liminal phases, to (re)conceptualise understanding of 'resistant' learner behaviours encountered in Indigenous Studies classrooms. As a framework that is neither student nor teacher centred (Cousin, 2006), threshold concepts research enables an exploration of learners and educators both separately and relationally. The disciplinary focus of the threshold concepts framework also allows for the inclusion of Indigenous Elders, as knowledge holders, in the study.

## **The focus of the study**

To return to the question raised by the learner in the prologue, we can interpret the inquiry as being, at best, insensitive. The implications of a person who sleeps with animals range from primitiveness to a lack of hygiene. These insinuations are not lost on Indigenous Studies scholars who are usually well versed in the enlightenment idea of the great chain of being and the routine placement of Indigenous peoples at the bottom of such lists and ladders (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Reynolds, 1983). Considered against this background, the framing of the student's question possibly has a racist undertone, or it could reflect a level of ignorance. If we assume that students come to our classrooms to learn, we might expect that some of their questions will reflect a lack of knowledge of factors that educators have come to take for granted. As many Indigenous Studies educators will be aware, these kinds of questions will also be opportunities for students to learn.

The threshold concepts framework allows a window into student learning experiences, which recognises the interdependence of teaching and learning as wellbeing overtly situated in the disciplinary context (Cousin, 2006). This multi-pronged aspect of the threshold concepts framework allowed a triumvirate of perspectives, which included students whose learning I wanted to understand in more detail but also lent credence to Indigenous educators who teach the learners and to Elders as key Indigenous Knowledge holders in the disciplinary context. My initial intent was to explore with learners and

educators what students found most challenging in their Indigenous Studies learning. Given the centrality of liminality and troublesomeness to the threshold concepts framework, I imagined this would be something that students in particular would be able to articulate and very likely in relation to course content. From this discussion of challenge, I expected to be able to identify the features of a threshold concept. I discuss in greater detail the extent to which this occurred, but ultimately, there was a shift in project trajectory based particularly on the student interviews. Drawing on qualitative research interviews with students, interviews with educators of Indigenous Studies and interviews with Aboriginal Elders, my study characterises students' learning journeys as rites of passage (Meyer & Land, 2005; Hawkins & Edwards 2015), shifting from novices through liminal and for some learners, transformative experiences. As we will see from the findings, this study suggests that students experience transformative changes in understanding, thinking, and being, albeit with clear challenges for learners and educators along the way.

### **Significance of the research**

When a learner enrolls in an Indigenous Studies subject, it might be the only time educators have the opportunity to teach students about Indigenous Australian peoples and cultures and to comprehend the broader national context in which all Australians live. Given the potential impact this could have, it is an opportunity we should not take lightly. There are two, intertwined, key reasons why this research is important. Firstly, Indigenous health and socio-economic status, despite some gains, continue to lag behind that of non-Indigenous Australians. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody indicated the strong link between a complex combination of colonial legacies, contemporary policies and Indigenous Australian inequity. Similarly, the social determinants of health explain the interplay between social inequality and health inequity (Marmot, 2011), which are compounded by factors such as racism and past and contemporary effects of colonisation (Fisher et al., 2019), as well as the mental health implications of issues such as poor housing, educational disadvantage, and unemployment (Zubrick et al., 2010).

Secondly, the work required to address the array of inequity issues, and improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians will require collaboration with non-Indigenous people. Given

the small Indigenous proportion of the population, 3.3%, (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), it is likely that non-Indigenous people will continue to dominate the workforce, interacting with and making decisions which impact upon Indigenous Australians. The understandings learners garner in their university education have the potential to make graduate professionals who can work more effectively with Indigenous Australians and communities and create better citizens. While this is a small-scale study and the findings are illustrative rather than generalisable, the wholistic model for understanding student transformative learning experiences has the potential to inform teaching practice and the preparation of teachers for practice in Australian Indigenous Studies.

## **Thesis style, structure and chapter orientation**

I use some stylistic conventions, particularly in relation to Indigenous naming, which may not be familiar to all readers. In this section, I set out the naming conventions, explaining my reasoning and choices. I also explain some technicalities which I hope will aid thesis navigation. Finally, I outline the thesis chapters.

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous Australians?**

Language and conventions to describe the First Peoples of the continent now known as Australia have a vibrant life and a complex history of their own. Prior to the colonial invasion, there were an estimated 250 different languages and many dialects spoken across the geographical land mass (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014). Wiradjuri, Yamatji, Barkindji, Arrernte, Kalkadoon, and Palawa are a sample of those language groups which Indigenous Australians might now use to explain ancestral and geographical connections. Consistent with this practice, I use a citation practise that is becoming increasingly common in Indigenous Studies literature, which is to note the Indigenous affiliation (italicised in the example below) of an author or authors to distinguish Indigenous authors. For example:

In Australian Indigenous Studies, theorists such as *Quandamooka* scholars Moreton-Robinson and Martin; *Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri* scholar Irabinna Rigney; and *Torres Strait Islander* scholar Nakata, form the foundations of our theory building, from which much contemporary scholarship has evolved.

I do this in cases where I refer to a particular author's work and where Indigenous scholars have identified their affiliations through their scholarly writing or in the public domain. I commonly employ the practice the first time an author is mentioned. In-text citations of Indigenous authors are not identified in this way. Similarly, I follow the practice for international Indigenous scholars where it is known. I use the general term non-Indigenous to refer to people who are not Indigenous Australians.

Despite a resurgence of naming based on traditional affiliation, colonisation looms as a deep marker which imbues and inflects much of our discourse, despite efforts to escape its definitions. Following colonisation, many of the terms used to describe or refer to the original inhabitants were those determined by the colonisers. For example, Aboriginal is a generic term used to describe Indigenous Australians but also some Indigenous groups of Canada. The anachronistic term 'Aborigine', frequently used in historical documents, is now considered an offensive term by many Indigenous Australians (Carlson et al., 2014). The term is associated with an era where Indigeneity was inextricably tied to colonial categorisations of Indigenous Australians according to blood quantum (half-caste or quadroon, for example) and skin colouring as a measure of assimilation (Bond et al., 2014). However, terminology remains contested, controversial and political, as a recent exchange in our Australian parliament (where Indigenous Australian representatives are few) between a non-Indigenous parliamentarian and their Indigenous counterpart attests. In response to an assertion by a non-Indigenous senator that the Indigenous senator could rightly be called an Indigenous Australian, the Indigenous senator replied that nomenclature was an insult, declaring her affiliation as Gunnai Djap Wurrung Bralakaulung Gunditjamara (Allam, 2022).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous Australians are terms now commonly used as pan-Indigenous terms, particularly in formal and government documents. The former refers to the two distinct groups of Indigenous peoples of Australia, those from the mainland and those from the islands of the Torres Strait. The term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander was often abbreviated as ATSI, particularly in government documents, a practise which is now also outdated and not commonly used. First Nations Australians or First Nations Peoples are terms which are also now beginning to be adopted, particularly in universities. Recognising that all these terms homogenise

culturally distinct groups of people and acknowledging the importance of naming (Carlson et al., 2014), I have nevertheless settled on the use of the term Indigenous Australian as an imperfect but necessary descriptor. Indigenous Australian or Indigenous Australia is consistent with the terminology of Indigenous Studies and current (although changeable) terminology used in the Australian Higher Education sector, for example in the *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025* or the ubiquitous Indigenous research methodologies.

I use capitalising conventions, which are commonly used by Indigenous authors but are not yet accepted in all scholarly circumstances. For instance, a journal editor recently removed all my capitalisation of the word Indigenous in a paper for publication, which required a lengthy explanation to justify and painstaking care to rectify. The term Indigenous Australians, for example, is always capitalised, and Indigenous is usually capitalised where it refers to an Indigenous person or peoples. Occasionally indigenous may be in lower case when it refers to global indigeneity. The words Elders and Country are capitalised also.

It is common in some Aboriginal communities for Elders to be called Aunty or Uncle as a sign of respect. The ‘title’ of Elder is usually determined by particular communities, but the use of the term Elder (and thus Aunty or Uncle), once given, can be used by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Many Australian universities have connections with Indigenous Elders as either Elders-in-residence or through Elders Advisory Committees. Commonly, though not always, those individuals would be called Aunty or Uncle and then their first name. I use those titles for the Elders who contributed to this study.

There are topics in the thesis that may be uncomfortable to read, particularly in the learner commentaries. The learner narratives sometimes touch on common stereotypes such as (mis)perceptions of Aboriginal people as untrustworthy, reflecting the thinking that Indigenous educators and their non-Indigenous counterparts are likely to encounter in the classroom. I have aimed to retain the spirit of the learner narratives, and consequently, there are a few occasions where quoted text from participants contains expletives.

## Teachers and student or educator and learners?

It is common in Australia to use the term students to describe people enrolled to study at university. In the thesis, I mostly use the terms learners or learner to refer to Australian higher education students in general and more specifically when referring to the student participants of this study to maintain an emphasis on the idea of learning, which is central to the thesis. There is some use of the word student, for example, to avoid repetition in single sentences, as follows:

For another *learner*, Jessica, who was one of only two *students* in this cohort to have relationships with Aboriginal Australians outside of the university context, having Aboriginal friends was fertile grounds to facilitate her transformative journey.

Similarly, educators in Australian universities are commonly called academics or teachers. I wanted to reinforce the idea of these academics as educators for the purposes of the thesis. Thus, in most cases, I refer to academics as educators. I am aware there are other naming conventions used internationally and that in the United States, academics would be called faculty, for example. I use pseudonyms to humanise the learner and educator participants and because it allows the reader to ‘follow’ the learners and educators through the thesis. At the beginning of the findings chapters, I will remind the reader of which group the participant belongs to either by writing ‘one educator, Mary’ or alternatively, Mary (educator). Thereafter, I add periodic reminders of the participant status rather than every time I use a participant quote to avoid unnecessary repetition and distraction.

I will sometimes recap (particularly in relation to the learner participants) information provided in earlier chapters, which I hope will facilitate navigation through the document, but this is also a regular reminder of the ‘whole’ participant even where thematic analysis results in the disaggregation of participant quotes. For example, this learner quote from chapter six (the third data chapter) restates something we have learned previously about the learner, Kelly, in chapter four:

Kelly, a learner who did not grow up in Australia and felt that there were many things about Indigenous Australia of which she was ignorant, explains how her thinking has changed.

## Technicalities

Common practice in the literature is not to use capitalisation when writing threshold concepts and transformative learning. I will continue this practise. Some authors use abbreviations for threshold concepts (although this is not common) and for transformative learning. I have chosen not to abbreviate, recognising the difficulty of keeping track of acronyms, abbreviations, and associated jargon in a lengthy document. There are some terms that are commonly used in the discipline or are jargon. For example, I use single quotation marks to denote this:

Like many colleagues, I was particularly interested in the idea of ‘student resistance’.

Similarly, I use single quotation marks for colloquialisms that are occasionally deployed to make a point, such as:

The ‘aha’ moment of understanding...

Both long textual quotes of referenced literature and participant words are indented. As noted above, the participant quotes are always identified by pseudonym. Short quotes from the literature are indicated by double quotation marks. Participant short quotes are distinguished in the text by being italicised, as the following example demonstrates:

As Luke (educator) suggests, the early weeks of a teaching session are *crucial from my perspective in terms of setting an example for the way that you discuss issues.*

The context and focus of the study is Australian Indigenous Studies. I recognise that Indigenous Studies is an international discipline but for the purposes of this study I refer to Australian Indigenous Studies, including learners and educators in the Australian context. I use both Indigenous Studies and Australian Indigenous Studies throughout the body of the thesis. Although the study findings may have broader relevance to the field of Indigenous Studies teaching and learning, the findings of the study are specific to the Australian context.

## Chapter orientation

The following chapters address the study findings by interweaving the experiences of the learner participants with the expert voices of the educators interviewed for the study and finally by highlighting the clear directives from a group of Elders about what we should be teaching in the curriculum. I take an iterative approach to theoretical ideas such as the threshold concepts framework. For example, I have briefly introduced the threshold concepts framework in this introductory chapter, then expand on it in the literature review chapter before honing the focus to the idea of rites of passage in the methodology chapter, and finally adding layers of more finely grained consideration to each of the phases of the rites of passage in the findings chapters.

Chapter Two contextualises the study in the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies, considering the background and development of the discipline, as well as the learner and educator perspectives. The chapter considers the role of national ignorance in the socialisation of university learners prior to taking up their Indigenous Studies learning. Finally, the chapter then expands on Meyer and Land's (2005) notion of liminality through an exploration of the original anthropological conceptions of liminality of Turner (1969) and van Gennep (1960), as well as the more contemporary work of Hawkins and Edwards (2015) which traverses both threshold concepts and liminality. Key concepts such as transformation, troublesome knowledge, and tacit knowledge are explored, and the critiques of the threshold concepts framework are outlined.

In chapter three, I detail the research design, methodology, and methods guiding the study, outlining the constructivist and Indigenous approaches underpinning the research. The chapter describes in detail the project methods, including the ethical procedures for the study, the participants, data collection, and data analysis. In addition, I outline some of the unexpected challenges of the study. I document the shift in my thinking that led me from a general intent to better understand student learning in Indigenous Studies, to identifying disciplinary threshold concepts, and culminating in a more specific focus on liminality and learning as a rite of passage.

Chapter four, five, and six are the three findings chapters in which I explain the key outcomes of the study. Using the rites of passage ideation deployed by Meyer and Land

(2003; 2005), I use a three-part trajectory framework from the preliminal phase, through liminal and post-liminal phases, for these three chapters. Each chapter begins with a theoretical overview relevant to the phase of the rite of passage, both to orient the reader and to interweave the findings and theoretical frame. Each findings chapter is polyvocal in that the voices of the learners, educators, and in the first chapter, the Elders, are intertwined through each of the chapters, rather than situated in a single chapter for each participant group.

Chapter Four commences with the preliminal phase. This is perhaps the least explored aspect of the threshold concepts framework, and yet if we are to begin where students are, then this early phase of learning is a critical juncture. This early period of learning is where classroom rules are set, where students settle into the rhythms of the learning environment, and where boundaries for behaviour are established. The learner participants are introduced in this chapter, and I consider the overlapping metaphoric spaces that learners (and educators) enter; the liminal space and the cultural interface.

Chapter five continues the trajectory by examining the liminal phase of the rite of passage. The liminal phase or liminality is perhaps the most taken up in the literature. It is the phase characterised by troublesomeness and struggle for understanding that resonates most strongly with educators and is most challenging for learners. In this chapter, I explore familiar patterns of liminality and the nuances of how different students might have a range of experiences. The chapter also delves into the idea of threshold crossing as supported through the idea of safe space and storytelling.

Chapter six explores the postliminal learning phase in which transformation is said to have occurred. This chapter draws on learner experiences to suggest that there may be varying levels of transformation experienced by learners and observed by educators. This is the phase of reintegration and examines what factors support transformation and some of the potential costs of that transformation for both learners and educators.

Chapter seven draws together the multiple threads of the study, returning to the threshold concepts framework to discuss the liminal journey, which I characterise as both enlightening and an ordeal. The chapter considers ways to better prepare both learners and educators for the experience before turning to what I suggest are a set of unresolved

matters for universities and policy makers in relation to the preparation of educators for Indigenous Studies teaching. I tentatively suggest one potential threshold concept, colonial violence, in Indigenous Studies, explaining why others were not identified.

Chapter eight summarises the significance of the study and its implications and limitations. In this chapter I also consider the general prospects for further research suggested by the study, and use the opportunity afforded by the unique space of thesis writing to chart particular possibilities for my own future research. Reaching into the realms of possibility rather than probability, I venture to consider, briefly, the implications for national governance structures.

## **Chapter 2: An Inquiry to Suit Complex Classrooms Complicated by Cultural Legacies**

Two related and intertwined issues vex educators of Australian Indigenous Studies. First, the archetype of resistant student that takes up both space in the literature and a considerable amount of classroom time and emotional labour (Asmar & Page, 2009; Bullen & Flavell, 2017). Second, the desire to transform the thinking of all students so that they might better understand Indigenous peoples and communities and, critically, gain some insight into the invisible web of privilege which continues to negatively impact Indigenous Australians and too often renders Indigenous success invisible. For many academic educators this means guiding students to understand the enduring colonial legacy underpinning contemporary social relations and disciplinary curriculum at universities. The desire to expose the ongoing legacies of colonialism is increasingly intertwined with narratives of strength, offsetting deficit accounts of Indigenous Australians (Fogarty et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2021).

The common narrative of the resistant learner is of a student who is challenging in the classroom, who makes racist or prejudicial comments, or who is affectively hostile. Educators describe students using many of the characteristics of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) or white privilege; resistance, silence, or anger (Hollinsworth, 2016a; O'Dowd, 2012). Commonly, these 'war' stories have three features. To begin, the stories usually involve a description of the particular student behaviour; something said or not said. Often the story then shifts to what an educator has done to try to manage or ameliorate the student behaviour, including a reflection of how difficult it is to manage these students or the way in which a disruption has occurred in a classroom. Sometimes, the account includes the feelings of the educator. Finally, though, the story often concludes with a description of transformation. This part of the story often takes place in the academic's office, where the student has come to offer their new-found insights, or sometimes it is in the form of an email which comes after the teaching period has finished when something in the student's experience triggers an epiphany. This is the kind of transformation envisaged in Mezirow's (1991) shifted frame of reference and taken up by Meyer and Land (2003) in their theorisation of transformative learning in the threshold concepts framework. The experience of this transformation for the student is a key focus of this study.

In the preceding chapter I introduced colonialism through the mechanism of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, drawing an explicit connection between the stark and entrenched systematisation of disparity underpinning many of the deaths, and the Commission's recommendation for improved education of Australians about Indigenous histories and cultures. While making this connection between structural privilege and education I also seek to show in the thesis, through explication of the deaths of John Pat and Ms Dhu, some of the confrontation experienced by many students as they learn of colonial violence. For some students their Indigenous Studies learning experiences will seem to be the first time they have encountered this knowledge. Although it may seem that way, their Indigenous Studies experience is unlikely to be the first time most students have learned about Indigenous peoples. However, it may be the first time the connection between colonialism and privilege has been drawn to learners' attention.

In this chapter I examine more closely the disciplinary context of the Indigenous Studies teaching and learning milieu. The chapter begins with an outline of the Indigenous Studies context, including the disciplinary development in Australia, as well as a discussion of some key issues in relation to learning and teaching in Indigenous studies. Indigenous Studies learning is contextualised more deeply within a framework of a potential set of pre-conditions for learners coming to this field for the first time. I also explore in greater depth the threshold concepts framework, including critiques, to lay the foundations for a more detailed discussion of troublesome knowledge, tacit knowledge and liminality, which forms the theoretical lens for this research.

## **Untangling the Disciplinary Context of Indigenous Studies in Australia**

Australian Indigenous Higher Education includes two separate, but aligned areas; Indigenous Studies and Indigenous student education. Indigenous Studies is sometimes confused with Indigenous Education, which commonly refers to Indigenous students' access, participation, and success at university (Ma Rhea & Russell, 2012). Practice in this area has focused on growing Indigenous student numbers enrolled in university courses and the often-complex work of guiding individuals from university entry through to completion. Given the persistent under-representation of Indigenous people in higher

education there has been a considerable concentration of energy in this area (Trudgett, 2014). Historically the research, teaching and administration associated with these two activities have grown from similar roots in the Indigenous Centres which all Australian universities have as part of their institutional support for Indigenous students (Ma Rhea & Russell, 2012), although in recent years these two areas have often separated and flourished in a variety of ways, depending on the institution and the staffing profile. For example, some Australian universities now have both an Indigenous student support centre and a separate research and teaching entity. However, Indigenous Education is not the current focus as this study occurs in the context of Indigenous Studies.

In the context of this study Indigenous Studies relates to the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies that includes Indigenous pedagogy and Indigenous research methodologies (discussed further in the next chapter) as well as a plethora of interdisciplinary research in fields such as Education, Law and the Health Sciences. Indigenous Studies research is burgeoning, particularly internationally, and is characterised by key ideas such as sovereignty, privilege and race. The field is considered strongly interdisciplinary (Charles et al., 2016) with many Indigenous scholars having undertaken disciplinary education in other fields. Growth in Australian Indigenous research methodology has been a significant contribution to the discipline (see for example, Rigney, 1999; Martin, 2008). The work of Australian Indigenous Studies theorists such as Quandamooka scholars Moreton-Robinson and Martin; Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri scholar Irabinna Rigney; and Torres Strait Islander scholar Nakata form the foundations of our theory building, from which much contemporary scholarship has evolved. Australian Indigenous Studies is the focus and context of this study.

These theoretical and methodological concerns, relevant to Indigenous Studies, also have application to how we consider and practise the education of Indigenous students (Nakata, 2006). Indigenous Studies is now commonly taught to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and is often popular with international students seeking to increase their knowledge of Australia and sometimes because it is imagined to be an 'easy' option (Morgan & Golding, 2010). Today the teaching of Indigenous Studies in Australian universities continues to occur predominantly through Indigenous centres under the

direction of, if not always taught by, Indigenous academics. For the purposes of this thesis, I distinguish Indigenous Studies from Indigenous Perspectives, which are taught in Australia in a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and increasingly in the scientific disciplines, often by non-Indigenous educators. Indigenous Studies is the disciplinary context of this study.

## **Background and Development of Indigenous Studies in Australia**

The history of Indigenous Studies in Australia can be traced back to the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) in the mid 1960's, followed by the establishment of the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs (CRAA) at Monash University, and subsequently by the eventual establishment of Indigenous centres in all universities (Ma Rhea & Russell, 2012). Anthropology and the study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures underpinned the founding of the AIAS in 1964 (Mulvaney, 2008;) with a focus on salvaging the perceived remnants of Australian Indigenous societies “before it disappears” (Berndt & Tonkinson, 1988, p. 4). A landmark Conference on Aboriginal Studies in 1961, with a strong anthropological disciplinary focus, preceded the establishment of the AIAS (Berndt & Tonkinson, 1988). The conference and the establishment of the AIAS was driven by an imperative to create a record of Aboriginal societies for the “benefit of posterity” (Barnes, 1988, p. 269) before assimilation altered traditional communities irrevocably and it “largely eschewed historical studies and research into part-Aboriginal (sic) communities” (Mulvaney, 2008 p. 60). There was also already a growing tension between the study of ‘traditional’ communities and those south-eastern Australian communities impacted more significantly by frontier conflict and colonial rule. While the disciplines and contemporary thought about Indigenous Australians are changing it remains surprising how many Indigenous Studies learners find it difficult to separate those notions of Indigenous Australians as somehow traditional and located in the geographic, desert centre of Australia from the Indigenous staff they see teaching in their classrooms. Moreover, learners are usually bereft of understanding of the potential hurt this might cause those staff, who will be proud in their Indigeneity.

Culture is a significant issue for the discipline of Indigenous Studies, given the common combination of Indigenous educator and (mostly) non-Indigenous students. It is

worthwhile considering how individual and collective notions of culture contribute to the context of the classroom. Nakata's (2007) notion of the Cultural Interface is a useful framework within which to consider the complexity of the Indigenous Studies classroom. The cultural interface is the contested space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, constituting:

histories, politics, economics, multiple and interconnected discourses, social practices and knowledge technologies which condition how we all come to look at the world, how we come to know and understand our changing realities in the everyday and how and what knowledge we operationalise in our daily lives. (Nakata, 2007, p. 9)

The idea of the cultural interface has been widely applied to teaching contexts (Brown 2010; Carey & Prince, 2015; Dillon, 2007; Dudgeon et al., 2018; Hart et al., 2012; Riley et al., 2015) and provides a useful theoretical conceptualisation of the immediate complexity of the Australian Indigenous Studies classroom.

## **Learning in Australian Indigenous Studies**

Learners also bring their own suite of complexities to the classroom. Students will have a variety of learning styles; some will have come to the classroom with the significant life experience of the mature aged student, others will have the more limited life experience of the school leaver. I have already argued, in the previous chapter, that students in Indigenous Studies come to their classrooms with varying levels of knowledge about Indigenous Australians, commonly gleaned from various media, be it film and television, social media, news media and schooling, which includes for many learners the now mandated Kindergarten to year 12 Indigenous curriculum. This unevenness of learner pre-requisite knowledge is compounded by disciplinary landscapes that continue to be characterised by overt absences and unspoken gaps (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022). While those disciplinary landscapes are changing, particularly in the professions, it remains the case that many disciplines taught at tertiary level have very little Australian Indigenous content. This lack of Indigenous content or connection in the disciplines means that Indigenous Studies does considerable 'heavy lifting' in the preparation of learners for professional practice and that students come to Indigenous Studies often with little

preparation. Moreover, the professions, where there has been ongoing curriculum development to ensure graduates are prepared to work effectively with Indigenous Australians, remain vexed by a range of professional practice issues.

Teacher education, for example, has been working for decades to address deficiencies in the two key areas: teaching of Indigenous Australian children; and the delivery of Indigenous curriculum to all children. In the 1980s the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) instigated the 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers by 1990 scheme (Hughes & Willmot, 1982). More recently, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership introduced Indigenous focus areas to the Professional Teaching Standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014). It is necessary for graduates to develop skills and knowledge in Indigenous Studies to be able to teach the required curriculum. Moreover, graduates need to develop skills in the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. Yet new graduates report that they are not very comfortable or confident teaching in schools where they are required to teach significant number of Indigenous students or to teach Indigenous curriculum (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Mayer et al., 2015). This discomfort remains despite these being two areas in which graduating teachers should have capability, according to the Professional Standards required for graduate teachers. This lack of robustness in the national school curriculum has implications for the knowledge, or lack of knowledge, that school students develop and bring with them to university Indigenous Studies learning. Some of these school leavers, poorly prepared by their underconfident teachers, will enrol in Indigenous Studies in their university courses, which was the case for some of the students who participated in this study.

The truth of Indigenous cultures and histories, as well as the Indigenous experience of colonialism, also often remains hidden, obscured or silenced in university level disciplinary curricula (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022). This disciplinary 'ignorance' could simply be explained as a gap in knowledge or, as Sullivan and Tuana (2007) suggest, as a more systematic unknowing designed to reproduce racial oppression. The 'history wars' (Macintyre & Clark, 2003), which deeply contested the colonial origins of the Australian nation, including major issues of contention such as massacres of Indigenous peoples (Hooper et al., 2020); or the removal of Indigenous children as genocidal (Robinson &

Paten, 2008); might be examples of such concerted efforts of erasure, rationalisation and justification of past misdeeds or management of guilt. An intellectual contest between historians spilled over into a fierce public, political debate about what truths are appropriate to tell in school classrooms and whether the achievements of white colonialists outweighed the violence of the conquest of Indigenous Australians (Parkes 2007). My experience teaching Indigenous Studies at university, and my observations of recent work to embed Indigenous perspectives in all degrees within institutions, lead me to conclude that many non-Indigenous Australians continue to be unaware of the extent of colonial violence or the rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories that have shaped our nation.

Critical race theorists refer to these curricula absences as a White masterscript, which recreates and reproduces graduates in its own image (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This curriculum dominance is changing, though, in Australian universities, spurred by Indigenous scholarly and community activism, and an increasing recognition, particularly in the professions, that this absence in curricula is problematic. Despite many professions already including discipline-relevant Indigenous perspectives (Bullen & Roberts, 2019b; Kickett et al., 2014), the magnitude of the task of Indigenising disciplinary curricula cannot be underestimated. This curriculum focus will mean that many more university students at all levels of study will encounter Indigenous curriculum in their degrees. Research into student learning and teaching in this context is thus particularly timely. I turn now to explore the texture of the unknowing that seems to be a feature of Indigenous Studies learners.

## **Teaching in Australian Indigenous Studies**

As noted earlier, Indigenous Studies is commonly taught from Indigenous Centres and is increasingly delivered by Indigenous Australian educators, with students being mostly non-Indigenous Australians and from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. Each participant — learner and educator — brings to the classroom a variety of epistemological and ontological views. For example, according to Brookfield (1998) educators see the classroom through four lenses: our own biographies as learners; learners' perspectives of our teaching; our colleagues' influences; and the understandings developed through reading of the research literature. The first three of these are critical to understanding the

particular context of Indigenous classrooms. Although Indigenous educators' learner biographies are likely to diverge significantly, many may also have had negative educational experiences related to their Indigeneity. The literature is replete with examples of prejudicial treatment of Indigenous students or their negative experiences in tertiary study (Andersen et al., 2008; Hollinsworth et. al., 2021; Nakata, 2007; Sonn et al., 2000). Some Indigenous educators will also have experienced prejudice or racism at the hands of their students (Asmar & Page, 2009) or other staff (Fredericks, 2009). Individually, educators need to be persistent, patient and persuasive (Page, 2022) to have the capacity to continually return to teaching Indigenous Studies classes knowing that there will be resistant students, racist comments and misinformation to address (Hollinsworth, 2016). Indeed, there is clear evidence that Indigenous academics both in Australia and overseas struggle with the emotional labour associated with teaching largely non-Indigenous students (Fredericks, 2009; McAllister et al., 2020; Thunig & Jones, 2021).

Equally though, Indigenous educators are driven by a desire to open the minds of non-Indigenous students and derive satisfaction from doing this work (Asmar & Page, 2009). There is a developing literature exploring the notion of Indigenous Knowledges characterised as gifts or hospitality (Bullen & Flavell, 2017; Kuokkanen, 2008). Sharing and the notion of reciprocity are common aspects of Indigeneity, yet Sámi scholar Kuokkanen (2008) cautions that the gift of Indigenous knowledges to the academy is not infinite and should not be taken for granted. Anecdotally, I am aware that these issues (emotional labour and prejudice) lead to discussions amongst colleagues, again influencing approaches in the classroom. Educators also bring their particular discipline experiences, often not in Indigenous Studies, to the classroom, and for an overtly multi-disciplinary field, this adds further complexity.

### **The Role of Elders in Australian Universities**

Elders are a major source of wisdom (Yunupingu & O'Donaghue, 2013) and Indigenous Knowledges for their communities. They are "teachers, facilitators, guides, role models and care providers for all people in their community" (Bond, 2010, p. 41). Elders often lead and care for families in complex kinship systems that involve extended families (Lohoar et al., 2014). The status of Elder is determined by their communities through

local protocols and decision-making processes. Elders are often entrusted with managing modern day crises in health (Preuss & Napanangka Brown, 2006) and education (Bond, 2010) in the absence of effective government policy and services. Their care and custodianship of Country is also increasingly recognised. For example, the climate crisis is bringing about renewed respect for Indigenous practices of land management (Reid et al., 2020) which have hitherto been undervalued and misunderstood (Nursey Bray et al., 2019). Yet Elders are also increasingly called on by the broader society as the desire for Indigenous community engagement presses on institutions such as schools, for instance, which now look to Indigenous community members and Elders to share Indigenous Knowledges and stories (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011), and to patch gaps in educator knowledge in the absence of sufficient numbers of Aboriginal educators.

Increasingly, Elders also have formal and informal roles in Australian universities, where they perform a wide range of functions including support and pastoral care for Indigenous students (Chapman & Whiteford, 2017) alongside ceremonial duties, such as Welcomes to or Acknowledgements of Country, or serving on advisory committees. More recently Elders have contributed to curriculum development and to guidance of research projects (Qualye & Sonn, 2019; Wilson, 2007); supervision of graduate research students (Singh & Major, 2017); and on occasion approval of research projects (Coram, 2011). In my experience, Elders who work for universities in either formal employment arrangements or voluntary capacities are extremely helpful to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within the institutions. However, they are “not naive about the operation and persistence of colonial history or non-Indigenous experiences of history—and the privilege that stems from that...” (Ross et al., 2020, p. 100). Elders work to create opportunities for the next generations that they themselves were often denied.

### **Epistemologies of Ignorance: The Potential Preconditions for Australian Indigenous Studies Learners**

The phenomena of 'unknowing', 'not knowing' and the 'invisibility' of white privilege are now well established in relation to learners in Indigenous Studies contexts in both Australia (D.J.M. Phillips, 2011; Townsend-Cross, 2018;) and internationally (Rice et al., 2020; Tupper, 2011). I wish to make two points here. First, although obvious, it is worth pointing out that learners—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—come to their Indigenous

Studies classrooms with a variety of prior social and learning experiences. Second, while learners will have varying understandings of Indigenous Australians and colonial history, all are likely, particularly the non-Indigenous students, to share some aspects of unawareness (S.R. Phillips et al., 2007) similar to the lack of understanding of Indigenous history catalogued in such detail in the forensic documentation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. This apparent lack of knowledge of Indigenous histories or colonial regimes, whether wilful or unintended, may usefully be characterised as an 'epistemology of ignorance' (Jones, 2001; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Drawing on the work of earlier theorists, Alcott (2007) has developed a three-tiered typology of ignorance radiating from the individual's context to the individual's positioning in the broader society. The first type of ignorance is connected to the 'situatedness' of the knower; the second type stems from an individual's group identity; and the third is from the societal system in which the individual is located (Alcott, 2007). Below I draw out these three types of epistemological ignorance to suggest a more nuanced picture of how this ignorance may manifest for students in Indigenous Studies.

### **Situatedness**

Many, though not all, non-Indigenous learners will come to their Indigenous Studies university study shrouded in varying layers of privilege; knowers of particular perspectives underpinned by their social position and buttressed by national efforts to marginalise Indigenous matters and to oppress Indigenous peoples. The Indigenous Studies classroom is often a new and unfamiliar context. Most students will not have encountered an Indigenous educator, and many will have encountered little Indigenous content in their disciplinary curricula. Once in the classroom, learners' perspectives on the world can be unsettled by the very ignorance that surrounds them. Learners' situatedness in the classroom, where they meet Indigenous educators and challenging ideas (Bond, 2014; S.R. Phillips, 2016), can reduce certainty and frequently renders even the most confident learners tentative<sup>8</sup>. In the context of the Indigenous Studies class, ignorance is exposed and learners' established convictions, based on particular ways of knowing, are often quickly disturbed. Learners can be unbalanced by the epistemically unequal context, reverting to the status of novices in unexpected ways.

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<sup>8</sup> I take up the implications of this for Indigenous educators later in the thesis.

Alcoff (2007), though, cautions that “knowers are not interchangeable” (p. 40). Each individual has a unique, subjective set of experiences through which they will have developed a set of beliefs and values, which will in turn influence their judgements. For me, this translates to students of Indigenous Studies as bringing their own suite of complexities to the classroom. Students will have a variety of approaches to their learning, and mature aged students will have significant life experience, while recent school leavers will have fewer life experiences. Yet, educators and learning systems (universities in this case) tend to aggregate cohorts of individuals under the banner of ‘student’ eschewing the spectrum of subjectivities situated in our classrooms. This is even as we sometimes acknowledge the variety of learner experiences generally. Educators, too infrequently, have the opportunity to know students as nuanced individuals. However, my study findings would suggest that if we are able to know our students, we might better understand the magnitude of the transformations some will make.

## **Group Identity**

An individual’s group identity follows situatedness as a source of epistemic ignorance in the typology. According to Alcoff (2007), group belonging is likely to influence an individual’s judgement because “groups will sometimes operate with different starting belief sets based on their social location and their group-related experiences, and these starting belief sets will inform their epistemic operations” (p.45). This is not necessarily to suggest that all members of specific groups think or act in the same ways but does acknowledge that factors such as gender or social class, for example, can produce different perspectives (2007). Similarly, learning theorists refer to an accrual of often uncritically absorbed values and assumptions accumulated through everyday life (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton & Roy, 2003) or what Mezirow (1997) would call habits of mind. While Alcoff’s (2007) typology does not explicitly note the possibility of multiple identities, it is likely that students will have overlapping group identifications, which adds further complexity. Non-Indigenous students of Indigenous Studies are likely to have multiple and overlapping sources of ignorance, much of which they will be unaware of, depending on their group affiliations. The cumulative effect of their individual and social group mediated ignorances may also be about the underlying game or episteme (Perkins, 2006) which could be “principally about fitting in, or more grandly about social capital” (Atherton et al., 2008, p. 7).

## Oppressive Societies

The third element of Alcoff's (2007) typology relates to the broader society in which individuals live and the experiences derived from being a member of a particular society. This element refers to the structured privilege and subsequent oppression which benefits some and not others. This privilege is reliant on the deployment of cognitive norms which include regular exhortations of justness in the face of evidence to the contrary. Australian nationhood has always rested uneasily on the foundations of Indigenous dispossession and unceded sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2005). The early colonial framing of 'the Aboriginal problem'—what to do with a remnant people decimated by disease, dispossession and wilful extermination—continues today, (re)presented as the problem of Indigenous unemployment, comparatively poor health outcomes and low educational attainment, as exemplified by the Closing the Gap rhetoric (Askew et al., 2020). This emphasis on gaps or not meeting the white 'standard' centres Indigenous deficits yet remains silent on the structural inequity and overt racism that entrenches disparity (Marmot, 2011) and negates the diversity of Indigenous experience (Altman, 2009) while diminishing a range of strengths based, Indigenous approaches to practice (Askew et al., 2020; Altman, 2009). The annual Closing the Gap reporting, and media conferences, reinforce the 'cognitive norm' that there remains an Indigenous problem, which successive national governments are aiming to resolve, highlighting the justness of the dominant society, while adrift from its colonial antecedents.

Alcoff's (2007) argument that ignorance can be fostered through societal patterns of dominance is a useful theoretical tool for explicating ongoing and entrenched inequity in general. For the purposes of this study, I am interested in the individual and societal factors that might shape the learner experience before an individual begins their Indigenous Studies learning. I return to Stanner (1979) whose metaphor of a window and landscape remains germane to the issue of how perceptions shape individual perspectives:

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. (p. 214)

This is not to suggest that learners are not capable of their own thought or that some learners may not come to their studies with racist ideation or existing prejudices, but rather to locate the learners and the study in a larger context. The national context in which, despite regular ceremonial reminders through Indigenous performance or Welcomes to Country or political flare ups following deaths in custody or Closing the Gap retreats, life settles back to ‘normal’ for (most) non-Indigenous people. In contrast, for Indigenous Australians, the reminders of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006) are regular and unremitting (Bond, 2021). However, this theory alone does little to illuminate a teaching path in a classroom.

Despite these conceptions of ignorance, it is unlikely to be predictive of behaviour (Code, 2012). I would argue this is especially so for learners in higher education. Learning may not always, or immediately, be the remedy for the ignorances outlined here but I would argue we cannot assume that to be the case. Although Code (2012) makes a gendered argument against the apparent objectivity of positivist epistemologies, the premise that homogenising difference in the interests of typical stances glosses over a range of perspectives excluded in such generalisations, is relevant for this enquiry. Code (2012) argues for a more detailed “remapping of the epistemic terrain” (p. 20) beyond the known facts we can learn about people, which do not necessarily concur with who the person is. This accords with Brookfield’s (1998) instruction that it is difficult to teach well if we do not understand how learners are experiencing the challenges and excitement of learning. As educators there are some facts we will know about our learners, ranging from the instrumental, to the more personal. Educators will likely know, for example, the degree a learner is enrolled in, whether they are first year or a later year, or if the student is international or local. Educators are also likely to have an idea about a learner’s age or gender, though not always with certainty. In conceiving of this study, my sense was that speaking to students about their learning through a systematic study, including the challenges, would reveal interesting nuances that are very difficult to garner in everyday teaching. As I outline below, the threshold concepts framework seemed a useful way to do this mapping due to its focus on both student learning and disciplinary context.

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## Threshold Concepts: A Deeper Exploration

In this section I provide a broad overview of the origins of the threshold concepts framework as offered by Meyer and Land (2003; 2005), including a discussion of their original characterisation with five criteria, and subsequent developments engendered by further research which built on the original threshold concepts project. I further discuss two key features of the threshold concepts framework: the role of tacit knowledge; and the process of liminality. I place particular emphasis on liminality, exploring it further in chapter three (the methodology chapter), where I foreshadow its use in the exploration and eventual framing of my research findings. Underpinning threshold concepts theory is the potential for transformative learning, discussed below primarily in relation to Meyer and Land's threshold concept framework but with reference to the broader work on transformative learning, a now diverse and fragmented field (Cranton & Roy, 2003).

The threshold concepts framework, like other new thinking in higher education, is built on the work of earlier theorists (Bradbeer, 2006). As a transformative learning theory, the framework shares similarities with Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Considerable interest in transformative learning grew from Mezirow's (1978, cited in Mezirow, 1991) original transformative learning model, developed in the context of research centred on women returning to study or work after periods out of formal learning or employment. The original model, later refined over many years of study and development, included key features such as disorienting dilemmas, habits of mind, transformed perspectives and critical reflexivity (Mezirow, 1990). There are parallels here with Meyer and Land's (2005) notion of transformation as a significant change in thinking often occasioned by a struggle with difficult knowledge (outlined further below), although interestingly critical reflexivity does not feature in the threshold concepts framework. In this respect, the threshold concepts framework focuses on the frequently challenging disciplinary concepts that create a pathway to new conceptual understanding for learners. Teaching of these concepts is sometimes not explicit because expert educators take them for granted or assume students have already grasped the requisite knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005). The framework is also concerned with observable behaviour change as reflected in increasing sophistication in language and written expression, as comprehension of the threshold concepts occurs.

The threshold concepts framework originally developed from a large scale, funded, higher education study in the United Kingdom investigating learning and teaching environments (Meyer & Land, 2003). The Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses project<sup>9</sup> sought to study student engagement and quality learning in light of a range of sector-wide issues such as widening participation, increasing technology use, larger class sizes and the growing emphasis on employability (Hounsell et al., 2005). While drawing on existing work focused on specific aspects of higher education, including approaches to learning and teaching (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997), the research team were interested in the complex interplay between teaching and learning, and disciplinary processes and practises. Like much Higher Education research, relevance to practitioners was emphasised (Tight, 2014). The study worked with course teams, from a range of scientific and humanities disciplines, across degrees with beginners to later year students. The mixed methods research deployed quantitative data collected from students using standardised learning and teaching inventories, as well as qualitative interviews with students and teaching staff. The data also included documentary evidence such as course outlines with assessment and subject learning outcomes.

In this early work Meyer and Land (2003) liken threshold concepts to portals, which students must negotiate before they can fully grasp the ideas, leading to comprehending disciplinary complexity in the way of experts in the field. When originally conceived, a threshold concept had five defining characteristics. A threshold concept would most likely be: transformative, leading to a significant change in student thinking; irreversible, in that once a concept is fully grasped it is usually impossible to shift back to the earlier way of thinking; integrative, as the concept helps students to draw connections between ideas in a discipline; but also bounded, as each concept will have an end point beyond which new concepts must be learned (Meyer & Land, 2003). More recently two further characteristics have been added: discursive and reconstitutive (Land, 2011). These features differentiate threshold concepts from more tangible knowledge in a discipline, for example, recalling formulas or memorising lists through a mnemonic device. While

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<sup>9</sup> Further detail about the overall project can be found on the project website <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/project.html>

the idea of transformative learning is central to the threshold concepts framework, the framework also frequently involves three other key ideas: troublesome knowledge; liminality; and tacit knowledge. Troublesome knowledge causes learners to struggle to grasp a particular concept, precipitating entry to a liminal space, in which the cognitive exertion required to comprehend these complex ideas occurs. Tacit knowledge includes sub-conscious or hidden knowledge of which students and educators may be unaware (Meyer & Land, 2006). Below I outline in further detail these key aspects of the threshold concepts framework beginning with transformativeness, before elaborating on troublesome knowledge and the associated liminality, and finally tacit knowledge. These aspects of the framework are critical features for my inquiry.

### **Transformativeness in the Threshold Concepts Framework**

Meyer and Land's (2003) notion of transformation includes cognitive, affective and potentially performative dimensions of learning. It is a formulation of transformation, which shares much with earlier theorisation of transformation in learning, albeit with a key difference. The threshold concepts framework overtly posits the idea of transformation within the disciplinary context, indicating that transformation leads to a "significant shift in the perception of a *subject*" [my emphasis] (p. 5). This location of the transformation within the disciplinary landscape is likely a consequence of the origins of the theorisation developing explicitly in a multidisciplinary higher education context rather than in education more generally. Cousin (2010) welcomes what she calls neither student-centred nor teacher-centred inquiry for taking account of learning in context rather than in general. The threshold concepts framework diverges from the polarisation which privileges either student-centredness or indeed teacher-centredness, recognising the symbiotic relationship of learner and educator in formal higher education. Rather than concentrating on student evaluation of teaching or learning, threshold concepts research offers a shared model of student-teacher investigation into the challenging aspects of a subject in a particular discipline (Cousin, 2010). This shared model recognises that the resultant process of transformed thinking is likely to be informed and constrained by the "particular disciplinary setting with its epistemological and ontological assumptions" (Scheja & Pettersson, 2010, p. 224).

Meyer (2010), arguing in support of this more focused approach compared to general theories of learning in higher education (see for example, Solo Taxonomy, Biggs & Collis, 1982; aspects of curriculum such as assessment, Boud, 1989; or higher education teaching practice, Ramsden, 1992), distinctly asserts that there is a considerable difference for educators between learning or “being taught about, reflecting on, and discussing this knowledge of how students learn *in general*, and how they learn *in the subject or discipline*”[author’s emphasis] (p. 196). Similarly, I would argue that the disciplinary context is critical to consider with respect to both teaching and learning in Indigenous Studies, making the threshold concepts framework particularly pertinent for this study.

For Meyer and Land (2003; 2005,) the culmination of transformation is for a learner to be able to think in the manner of a discipline expert. During the original Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses project they noted that for some students there were key concepts, which students often did not acquire through their studies, which impeded learner abilities to thoroughly understand the discipline area. Concepts like complex numbers in mathematics (Meyer & Land, 2003), and opportunity cost in the discipline of economics (Shanahan et al., 2006), were considered to be threshold concepts. Complex numbers, for example, involve a real and imagined element, which can be difficult to comprehend, but once understood, become the “gateway to the conceptualization and solution of problems in the pure and applied sciences that could not otherwise be considered” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 2). Without understanding these key threshold ideas, students might even be able to pass exams but would retain fundamental gaps in their understanding.

While transformed thinking sits at the heart of the threshold concepts framework, transformation is both an endpoint and a recurring phenomenon, as the passing of each conceptual threshold initiates new understanding, which subsequently leads to new threshold edges and crossings. This is not a definitive end-point or necessarily seismic type of transformation suggested as necessary by some critics of transformative learning theory (Newman, 2012) but rather an iterative process that may or may not involve a major educative event (Meyer & Land, 2003). While each threshold concept opens up new conceptual understanding they are also “bounded, possessing terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual spaces” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p 374). The

boundedness criteria accounts for the likelihood of there being multiple thresholds and concepts in a given discipline, given that each threshold concept has a boundary at which point another threshold might be encountered.

Boundary crossing experiences may vary across disciplines. Meyer and Land (2005) compare the potent effects for a student of Cultural Studies grasping the idea of hegemony and the implications for the culturally constrained nature of their own decisions, with the student of French who might struggle slowly with particular grammatical structures but over time develops an identity as a French speaker (p. 375). What an educator might expect to see in students are changes in language and expression but also a “shift in the learner’s subjectivity, a repositioning of the self” (2005, p. 374). In a study involving occupational therapy and physiotherapy students, Clouder (2005) identifies caring as a threshold concept in the health professions. An illuminating vignette of a student participant who responds to a patient’s distress by holding her hand (2005, p. 505) illustrates how learner transformation can extend into action.

### **Delving into Troublesome Knowledge**

While catalysing transformative learning through illuminating deeper ways of understanding and connecting disciplinary ideas to a more coherent whole is a mainstay of the threshold concepts framework, such change does not always occur seamlessly. Transformation and troublesome knowledge are separate but theoretically and practically linked criteria in the threshold concepts framework. These two criteria represent disciplinary (troublesomeness) and learner (transformation) focused aspects of the framework. While drawing on Perkins’ (2006) notion of troublesome knowledge, the roots of this work draws on Perkins’ (1999) hierarchy of knowledge, which includes inert knowledge, ritual knowledge, conceptually difficulty knowledge and foreign knowledge. Inert knowledge “sits in the mind’s attic” (1999, p.8) used only when called upon. Ritual knowledge is “routine and rather meaningless” (p. 8) and would include things like dates or a set of rote learned names. Conceptually difficult knowledge is a combination of everyday misinterpretations, mistaken understandings and unfamiliarity with specific disciplinary principles. Foreign knowledge stems from values and “perspectives which conflict with our own” (p. 10). Foreign knowledge is particularly challenging, as learners may not be aware of the knowledge as foreign (Perkins, 1999). The combination of

challenged personal values and unawareness implied in this notion of foreign knowledge is similar to troublesome knowledge and is apposite to this study. Indigenous Studies learning can stir latent (or explicit) prejudices and confront deeply ingrained, sometimes unacknowledged, ignorance and false assumptions about Indigenous Australia and the nation's history, resulting in considerable challenge for students, as the findings of this study suggest. One outcome of transformative learning might be to "liberate the individual from personal unconscious content and reifications of cultural norms and patterns" (Boyd & Myers, p. 264).

### **Tacit knowledge: What (Potentially) Lies Beneath the Surface**

Tacit knowledge is uncodified knowledge that is not easily available to recall (Meyer & Land, 2003; Polanyi, 1966). It is commonly associated with the development of skills, and as knowledge that is conveyed through informal, personal contact rather than through formal communication (Collins, 2001). Beginning with the premise that there are some things we know but cannot tell, the genesis of the idea of tacit knowledge can be traced to the work of Michael Polanyi (1966). This early philosophical work focused on psychomotor skills, using the example of floating or swimming. Anyone who has tried to teach a child to float will perhaps appreciate that this relatively simple activity involves a quite complex interplay of actions, not all of which are immediately explainable (1996). The activities of swimming or floating fit neatly into the broad threshold concepts framework, in that they can be difficult to learn but once achieved are unlikely to be lost again. The old saying, 'it's like riding a bike' suggests the irreversibility of these skills, and the accompanying knowledge. Of course, learning to float does not mean that one can swim, and mastering freestyle is not the same as being able to breaststroke, attesting to the boundedness of each. The mastery, though, of the ability to float, renders parts of the skill automatic or sub-conscious which may explain why it is a difficult skill to teach.

Tacit knowledge is relevant to this study as it is an integral, if lightly described, component of the threshold concepts framework. Students are said to struggle and experience liminality due in part to troublesome and tacit knowledge. The lack of explicitness around Meyer and Land's (2003; 2005) conception is intriguing. In my early readings I assumed that the tacit knowledge is that of the discipline or the educator, indicated by the "emergent but unexplained understandings" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 9)

formed through collective understandings common in disciplinary fields. I understood this unexplained knowledge to be deeply embedded discipline expertise which has slipped from the educator's conscious repertoire and is thus taken for granted in teaching and not explicitly taught to students. Drawing on Polanyi's (1966/1983) ground-breaking philosophical work on personal and tacit knowledge, Collins (2001) describes a fascinating case of tacit knowledge in teams of scientists, across several countries, who were undertaking gravitation radiation research.

The specifics of the research are less important here, however, the analysis of tacit knowledge is pertinent, and the case illustrates well how tacit knowledge can be out of the active grasp of the knower. Collins' (2001) paper outlines the case of a Russian research team who were able to achieve a particular measurement, using a specific machine and materials, which none of the other international teams had been able to replicate in their research, despite the experiments being published in detail. No research team was able to replicate the original experimental outcomes, despite numerous attempts, until a Scottish team worked in the labs with the Russian scientists. Collins (2001) made a strong case for the Scottish team's success resulting from the Russian team's tacit knowledge that was shared through close interaction and collaboration rather than the usual "formulae, diagrams or verbal descriptions" (p.71). The educators in this study are likely to have tacit knowledge developed through both their life experiences and their discipline expertise.

Tacit knowledge can also refer to students (Land, 2011; Land, et.al., 2005; Meyer & Land; 2003; 2005). Students potentially come to the study of Indigenous Studies with existing and, perhaps, tacit knowledge about Aboriginal Australia that can permeate their study. This may be so even for international students or those who have not always lived in Australia, and for Indigenous learners. Educators might also call these negative or false assumptions which for students can take the form of unused, unexplored and unexamined knowledge, which is hidden from view, partly because it is comfortable to move on when an individual is not affected by matters, as is often the case for non-Indigenous learners considering Indigenous issues.

Yet, the processes of individual, and societal ignorance, prejudice and racism so evident in Australian society lay the foundations for a collision of understandings for new

Indigenous Studies learners, particularly the majority of students who are non-Indigenous. Epistemologies of ignorance (Tuana & Sullivan, 2007) are developed through the socialisation individuals experience in their homes; the informal messages derived from schooling where educators are often uncomfortable with Indigenous content; and in society at large which draws on Aboriginal people for significant ceremonial occasions, to be largely forgotten between times, or shown through the deficit portrayal in negative press coverage. While this range of experiences varies between students, they are amongst the embedded logics which shape many of the learners who come to Indigenous Studies, including those who participated in this study. For some students Indigenous Studies learning brings into sharp and uncomfortable relief their overt or tacit misunderstandings and prejudices. While this can be more pronounced for non-Indigenous learners, Indigenous students also bring tacit knowledge to their studies.

One reason that tacit knowledge is so compelling is the potential for it to be transformed into explicit knowledge, and therefore transferable knowledge. The idea has been taken up with some enthusiasm by organizational management (Tsoukas, 2011). For the sciences and the broad field of organisation management, transferability is critical and there is considerable interest in making tacit knowledge accessible. Not everyone agrees however, about either the nature of tacit knowledge or the capacity for translation into more tangible knowledge. Tsoukas (2011) argues that we should not expect to translate tacit or convert understandings directly to more tangible knowledge but rather that, through discussion and explicit explanation, individuals are likely to recall things that may have been previously unnoticed. There is broad agreement that tacit knowledge can be exposed through interaction and social collaboration (Johnson et al., 2002). This discursive approach is central to much Indigenous Studies teaching and is often a catalyst for discomforts and troublesomeness for learners and educators.

## **Critiques of Threshold Concepts**

In the nearly two decades since Meyer and Land first started writing about threshold concepts, interest in their work has not just grown, but has captured the imagination of discipline experts interested in researching their teaching, in many disciplines and across the globe. While the original focus of threshold concepts research was on the discipline of economics, application of the framework has grown to include diverse discipline areas

such as nanoscience and technology (Park & Light, 2010); design (Osmond & Turner, 2010); analogue electronics (Harlow et al., 2011); health (Barradell & Peseta, 2017; Nicola-Richmond et al., 2016); and higher degree research (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). The sheer number and range of disciplines undertaking threshold concepts research is testament to the versatility of the framework, if not to the rigour of the theory. When I first started this research project there were few critiques of Meyer and Land's (2003) notion of threshold concepts, but during the degree there has been a small but persistent number of critiques which remain reasonably consistent. Critiques range from rather benign observations that the work is vague (Rowbottom, 2007) to much harsher appraisals that threshold concepts are a figment of the originators' imaginations (Rowbottom, 2007), or a scientific dead end (Salwén, 2021). The main criticisms centre on matters of definition and suggest that the threshold concepts criteria as well as the notion of a concept are ill-defined. Questions also arise about whether all the criteria are required to define a threshold concept. This lack of definition leads to difficulty in measurement and identification of threshold concepts.

Rowbottom (2007) takes issue with the lack of definition of a concept, although Salwén (2021) is less concerned with this dearth of clarity, arguing that the idea of a concept is straightforward, but agrees with Rowbottom's original challenge that the notion of threshold concepts is poorly defined and consequently impossible to measure or identify. The tentativeness of Meyer and Land's (2003) original description of threshold concepts as "likely to be transformative", "probably irreversible" (p. 5) or possibly, though not always, bounded, has not helped their cause. Yet there is a counter argument (Tight, 2014) that this provisional description of the criteria for threshold concepts is entirely reasonable, indeed expected, in the early stages of theorisation and that the subsequent application in an extensive range of disciplines and teaching contexts lends credence to the notion of threshold concepts as a theory.

Nicola-Richmond and colleagues (2018) are more optimistic about the potential applicability of threshold concepts to both enhance student learning and influence curriculum design. Their comprehensive analysis of the threshold concepts peer reviewed literature identifies the measurement of threshold crossing as a particular area of concern, raising questions about which measurement tools might be useful, when to measure and

how to deal with student variation (Nichola-Richmond et.al., 2018). The team recommend more rigorous (quantitative) research and larger scale enquiry as a remedy (2018). While their emphasis on scale and quantitative research reflects valuing of particular kinds of evidence, the researchers nevertheless endorse rather than denigrate the threshold concepts framework as of value to higher education learning and teaching. Similarly, Tight (2014), an esteemed higher education researcher, gives a qualified, yet ultimately definitive endorsement of Meyer and Land's work and the plethora of research the original study has spawned. Tight (2014) particularly commends the threshold concepts framework for its development within the domain of higher education research rather than being extrapolated and applied from other disciplines. Like much higher education research, he notes that the threshold concepts framework reflects a desire to improve practise, yet he also commends the vital role of theorisation to support enhancement of practise. I am heartened by this support for threshold concepts and hope that my work adds to the now considerable body of research undertaken using the threshold concepts framework.

### **Liminality: The Path to Transformation**

Troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2008), particularly those ideas which are counter-intuitive, leads students to a liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2006) where they often struggle before grasping key ideas that help learners to understand and connect key ideas in the discipline. In this liminal space students will potentially grasp the new knowledge, integrating it into their thinking and understanding of the discipline. In some cases, learners will resort to mimicry (Cousin, 2006) without genuine understanding. My observation of students in Indigenous Studies classes is that many students struggle to move beyond simplified binary thinking and indeed resort to mimicry through writing what the learner thinks the educator desires. This is what Nakata (2012) call "slippage into forms of thinking and critical analysis that are confined within dichotomies between primitivism and modernity" (p. 121). It is the potent combination of its potential for transformative learning; the familiarity of the idea of troublesome knowledge; and the resonance of the resultant behaviours when encountering troublesome knowledge, that led me to use the threshold concepts framework as a mode of inquiry for this study.

## Characterising the Liminal Space

The liminal space is a metaphorical space in which learners struggle to understand disciplinary knowledge, but also a space in which learners experience transformative processes. One way to think about the notion of spaces is in terms of metaphor. They are metaphors not in the strictest sense of one thing being described as analogous to something completely different (Gibbs, 2011) but in the sense that they have particular meanings beyond the meaning of the original words, like ‘splitting hairs’ for example (Ritchie & Zhu, 2015). Exploring metaphors can help us draw out inferences and tease out assumptions underpinning a topic (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Although more commonly the domain of cognitive linguistics, there are aspects of conceptual metaphor theory (1980) which could illuminate more deeply the spaces described here and foster enhanced understanding of the experiences of learners and educators in these spaces. The liminal space of the threshold concepts framework is clearly identified as a transitory space, bounded by knowledge limits which require mastery at one level to unlock the key to the next level and begin the next passage through an ideally transient place. It is a space where learners are likely to encounter challenges to their existing understandings as they grapple with unfamiliar disciplinary knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2005; Perkins, 1999) but the liminal space is also one with considerable potential for transformation (Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Meyer & Land, 2005; Turner, 1969). Both the cultural interface (Nakata, 2002; 2007) and the liminal space are conceptualised as spaces in which there are a several dual interactions. In the case of threshold concepts the interaction is between educator and learner; between teaching and learning; and between institution and individual. Within the space of the cultural interface, interaction occurs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and between connected, disconnected and unconnected histories. The Indigenous Studies classroom brings these types of spaces and interactions together.

All learners bring their individual and collective cultural experiences to this liminal space. I would suggest that the threshold concepts framework on its own is not sufficient to account for the student learning experience in the field of study Indigenous Studies. In many disciplinary contexts a learner’s culture is likely to be an invisible and unspoken companion to disciplinary study. Hawkins and Edwards (2015) draw particular attention to the implications of cultural background on both learning style and understandings of

leadership. They argue that for some international students used to didactic modes of instruction, more dialogic pedagogic approaches (group work for example) may create liminal uncertainty, and that students' pre-existing, culturally mediated understandings of leadership can contribute to counter-intuitive experiences for learners (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). I would argue that it is critical to explicitly take culture into account when consider learning in Indigenous Studies. From opening the semester with an Acknowledgement or Welcome to Country to introductions of teaching staff as Indigenous, or indeed non-Indigenous, the cultural dimension is immediately unlocked. In the complex spaces of Indigenous Studies classrooms, culture infuses everything, well beyond the discursive disciplinary context. I suggest that Nakata's notion of the cultural interface has particular relevance as we consider the new space that learners are about to enter and that while the liminal space and the cultural interface are largely metaphoric dimensions there may well be physical aspects to the space/s that are important to consider in the rite of passage.

### **Overlapping Metaphoric Spaces**

Nakata's (2007) notion of the cultural interface has interesting parallels with Meyer & Land's (2005) conception of the liminal space. However, the commonalities between the cultural interface and the liminal space are deeper than simply the notion of space. Theorisation of the two spaces shares four features. The first is that that they are sites of dual interactions; secondly, they are conceptualised as locales of struggle; and thirdly, they share the element of tacit knowledge. Finally, they are both ultimately seen as sites of transformation, although for different reasons. While both the cultural interface and the liminal space are conceived of as conceptual spaces and are written about in the context of learning and teaching, there is a subtle difference in focus. The threshold concepts framework is explicitly related to the process of learning and the impact of the process on the learner. Conversely, the cultural interface is specifically related to the learner and the impact of the sociocultural environment on the individual. The cultural interface focuses on what an individual Indigenous learner (Nakata, 2007) brings to the space and to the interaction with the non-Indigenous peoples, philosophies and ideas those learners may encounter, as well as how learners might defend their existing cultural knowledge or view it in light of teaching and learning in the space. As Nakata (2007) notes in relation to Indigenous learners, negotiating between the Indigenous and western

worlds is “a transforming process of endless instances of learning and forgetting, of melding and keeping separate, of discarding and taking up, of continuity and discontinuity” (p.10).

Threshold concepts theory also involves prior understandings an individual brings to the space—particularly as tacit knowledge—yet there is a much greater emphasis on the role of instruction and the subsequent learning rather than the buffeting forces of cultural dissonance which characterise the cultural interface. Nakata’s theorisation is focused on Indigenous learners. It could however be argued that, in much the same way as Indigenous students are buffeted by these transformative forces, so too are non-Indigenous learners. In the context of Indigenous Studies, non-Indigenous students also arguably enter a space in which similar transformative processes of sorting, holding, releasing and separating occur, involving the prior knowledge and experiences that have brought them to this point. Forgetting, remembering and the unknown are particularly salient features of learning in this space for non-Indigenous students. While the cultural interface is not necessarily conceptualised as a transitory space, neither is it static. Nakata’s notion of the transformative processes of the space as endless, implies a trajectory or conduit, however convoluted, which fuses with the idea of the liminal space as a passage.

## Chapter Three A Transformative Learning Inquiry

This research project is driven by my desire to better understand the experiences of the diverse but largely non-Indigenous group of learners who undertake Australian Indigenous Studies at university. As noted in previous chapters, literature in the broad field of Indigenous Studies often characterises non-Indigenous interactions with Indigenous peoples in a negative way, using terms such as ‘racist’, or explanatory theory such as white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011; DiAngelo & Allen, 2006; Nishi et al., 2016). I see behaviours in the classroom that could be labelled as racism or fragility, yet both the terms racist and fragile describe patterns of response, which are likely to pre-date a learner’s enrolment in Indigenous Studies. While these terms may describe deeply ingrained logics (Moreton-Robinson, 2014), for educators such labels provide little pedagogical direction. Understanding the ways in which students experience teaching and learning in Australian Indigenous Studies classrooms may illuminate more fruitful pedagogical possibilities (Brookfield, 1989) to facilitate transformative learning. The methodologies and methods chosen for this research reflect my desire to better understand, from a student’s perspective, experiences of learning in Indigenous Studies. This chapter makes explicit my methodological influences and the lens through which I have viewed the collected data, and carefully documents my approach to the research.

I have chosen to use qualitative research methods for this study as they are known to be effective for investigating questions concerned with human experience (Silverman, 2013) and allow for systematic exploration of social realities (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Qualitative methods are appropriate for this project with its general focus on the experiences of students undertaking Indigenous Studies learning and, more particularly, on disciplinary threshold concepts, including experiences of liminality and subsequent transformative aspects. The learners included two Indigenous students, an international student and a group of non-Indigenous students from a range of backgrounds. The educators were all Indigenous Australian. The chapter begins with an outline of constructivism and the general principles of this approach in educational research, including a discussion of sociocultural theory, a more specific branch of constructivism with specific relevance for this project. This part of the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the role of the threshold concepts framework in the research design. Finally,

I outline the project methods including the data collection, data analysis, participants and ethical aspects of the project.

### **Framing the Study**

The threshold concepts framework does not have a defined methodological approach (Cousin, 2010). Many threshold concepts studies use qualitative research methods, including interviewing educators and learners (Boustedt, 2007; Hill, 2017; Loertscher, 2014; Kiley & Wisker, 2009), while some researchers have used quantitative approaches (Nicola-Richmond, 2016) and research designs that focus on learner assessment tasks (Fouberg, 2013; Mangan, & Davies, 2010). According to Imenda (2014) the “conceptual or theoretical framework is the soul of every research project” (p. 185). Qualitative research projects may be less theory driven as the goal is often to develop theory inductively from the ground up (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2008). However, as Tight (2004) suggests in his critique of Higher Education research, there is usually “some theoretical perspective in mind, even though this is not expressed” (p.399). In this project I draw on constructivism and more specifically sociocultural theory to make explicit both the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of my approach to education, which influenced my decisions in the research design. Consequently, constructivism forms, as Tight (2004) suggests, the broad theoretical approach to the research.

I started this project with a very clear idea of using the threshold concepts framework as a conceptual framework to explicitly guide the project. The notions of liminality and troublesomeness resonated with behaviours I have observed in classrooms and in students’ written assessments. Coupled with this, the literature in Indigenous Studies teaching in Higher Education refers to student resistance which may change over the course of a semester or degree (Kickett et al., 2014; Ma Rhea & Russell, 2012). I wondered if student resistance, for example, might potentially reflect a liminal state, with the accompanying troublesome challenges and the resolution of resistance providing evidence of liminal journeys and crossing threshold boundaries. Guided by intertwined motivations for better teaching and the potential social justice benefits of better learning, the potential for transformative learning was also beguiling. In addition, I was also curious about whether there might be threshold concepts in the discipline of Indigenous Studies, mindful of Meyer and Land’s (2006) assertion that all disciplines are likely to possess such concepts.

## **Students as agents of their own learnings**

My understanding that students are actively engaged in their own learning underpins this study and has influenced the methodology and methods chosen to undertake the research. Constructivism is a relatively generic term used to describe a theory of learning based on the idea that knowledge is created by individuals through interactions with their environment (Adams, 2007; Murphy, 1997; Richardson, 2003). New understandings are constructed through internal processes of the mind rather than received or discovered (Alt, 2015; Hendry et al., 1999; Stipanovic & Pergantis, 2018). While there are several different types of constructivism, such as radical, cognitive and social (D.C. Phillips, 1995; Matthews, 2003) they share this common principle. Primarily learning involves an active cycle of meaning-making (Bruner, 2001; Boghossian, 2006) which occurs through a process of accretion whereby new knowledge is built on existing understandings (Finnegan, 2019; Naylor & Keogh, 1999) and commonly includes interaction with others (Biddulph & Carr, 1999; Tenenbergs & Knobelsdorf, 2014). As Woolfolk Hoy and colleagues (2013) indicate:

Constructivist theories of learning are concerned with how individuals make meaning of events and activities; hence, learning is seen as the construction of knowledge. In general, constructivism assumes that people create and construct knowledge, rather than internalize it from the external environment. (p.10)

Learning occurs through processes that can include thinking, reflecting, and creating of heuristics or schema (Palincsar, 1998). I see students as having agency in their learning, which does not negate the role of the educator but does suggest that learners are not passive recipients of teaching delivery.

Constructivism may be better understood in the broader context of its development as a theory. Constructivist theories developed as a response to behaviourism, which considered the mind of the individual as separate from context or surroundings, and more broadly positivist notions of absolute truths (Yilmaz, 2008), including the idea that learners come to education as empty vessels to be filled by direct instruction (Adams, 2007). The beginnings of behaviourist research were predicated on studies with animals, such as rats and dogs (Biddulph & Carr, 1999). The convergence of renewed science,

philosophy and psychology theorising, and the broader postmodernist movement (Boghossian, 2006; van Bergen & Parsell, 2018) disputed the understanding of learning as simply biological, removing the “rigid barrier between the natural and cultural sciences” (Poerksen, 2004, ix). The shift to constructivist thinking signalled a shift from an emphasis on the individual mind, free of context, as the locus of learning (Tenenbergh & Knobelsdorf, 2014) with a concomitant shift away from positivism with its emphasis on observability, reduction, causality and prediction (Bruner, 1990). The classic stimulus-response theories for example, which positioned learners as unreflective and lacking agency (Boghossian, 2006), fell out of favour with educators, who increasingly recognised students as active learners. This agency, though, is not only individual. Sociocultural constructivists see individuals as agential within the confines of their societal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) such as families and communities. Individuals are located in and influenced by sociocultural spaces.

As I noted in chapter two of this thesis, there is a connection between the national and global psyches in which many of our students have lived, and which students bring to their classroom experiences. The threshold concepts framework deployed here explicitly recognises this human-community juncture through the evocation of the rites of passage theory. While the notion of threshold concepts as a series of portals through which learners progress invokes ideas of individual journey, the discursiveness criteria of the framework illustrates the necessity of the classroom socio-interaction between learners, educators and peers. The deployment of the ritual journey, with its emphasis on separation, transition and reintegration, situates learners as members of a community. Learners join a (scholarly) Australian Indigenous Studies community as novices and in many cases experience transformative learning which shifts the learner’s view of their original discipline and sometimes of themselves. While students are agents of their own learning, Biesta (2013) argues that the role of the teacher is also critical, as teaching “brings something radically new to the student” (p. 449).

Constructivist theories, though, reframe not just the way we think about human learning, but about the very nature of truth. The idea of students making their own meaning from instruction is no longer particularly controversial. However, the early proponents of constructivism set in train a lengthy and contentious theoretical debate—largely along

broad paradigmatic domains—about not just the nature of learning but more divisively about the nature of knowledge itself. It is the epistemological claims related to knowledge (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2007; van Bergen & Parsell, 2018) which are a deeply contested point of departure from preceding theories of behaviourism and its objectivist theoretical underpinnings.

## **Resolving the issue of truth**

Critiques of constructivism, not surprisingly, centre on issues of truth and objectivity. If each individual creates their own knowledge, there can be no objective truth, because each individual experiences the world subjectively (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2007; Poerksen, 2004). Matthews' (2003) strident criticism, for example, which focuses on a general critique of the relative nature of truth, fostered by postmodernism and an apparent lack of objectivity in constructivist research, is emblematic of early appraisals. His use of the horror of slavery to assert that there are some truths that are undeniable based on a "verifiable historical record" (Matthews, 2003, p.53) is clever. It addresses the desired postmodernist community in a sensitive area. The case for an undeniable truth in relation to slavery is compellingly made, although that demonstrable record is built on oral testimony. The accounts of slaves are subject to the contestation precisely because they are not part of the Western record. Others suggest that it is not so much that nothing exists outside of social communication but that "communication changes how objects are perceived and the range of potential meanings they can embody" (Keaton & Bodie, 2011, p. 192). It is the range of potential meanings that is particularly pertinent for a study focused on student learning in Indigenous Studies. There is, for example, historical record which suggests that there was concerted action to eradicate Indigenous Australians during the colonial period, yet whether this regime equates to genocide or not remains deeply contested (Robinson & Paten, 2008; Rogers & Bain, 2016). It is equally clear that on the 26th of January 1788, the British First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay. Depending on your social community, as characterised by Alcoff (2007), you are more likely to call this either Australia Day or Invasion Day.

The epistemic question of truth is deeply philosophical, even as it relates to education (D.C. Phillips, 1995; van Bergen & Parsell, 2018; Young, 2008) and in that sense is theoretically beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, there is a critical dilemma that must be

addressed here, if not completely resolved. If we accept that each learner constructs their own knowledge based on internal processes of the mind, building on existing knowledge and through interaction with others, then it is necessary to engage with the critiques of constructivism, such as the argument that individual construction of knowledge poses a dilemma about the relativity of knowledge. Socio-cultural constructivism, which grew from Vygotsky's work with children (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), offers some resolution to this dilemma. Sociocultural constructivists posit that the "creation of knowledge cannot be separated from the social environment in which it is formed" (Adams, 2007, p. 246). The sociopolitical context which produces knowledge is also salient (D.C. Phillips, 1995). Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) recognises that students come to the classroom from social and cultural contexts as well as from educational backgrounds which will influence their responses and learning in a discipline (Macfarlane et al., 2007). While the early SCT research focused on learning of children and in schooling (Arievitch & Haenen, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999) it has also had considerable application in higher education contexts (Marginson & Dang, 2017), the aim of SCT research being to explore the connections between human cognition and the cultural environment (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

The cultural context relates to settings both outside and inside the classroom and institution. For my research socio-cultural theory allows me to consider the family, community and societal contexts of the learners as well as the direct learning environment of the classroom and the discipline. Learning is culturally and socially mediated, meaning an individual gets constant feedback from the external world through thought and action and is affected by ongoing sociocultural practices (Tenenbergs & Knobelsdorf, p.8). These principles suggest that student learning does not only take place in the classroom. The discursiveness of learning is underpinned by the idea that learning is mediated by others, a practise that is common in Indigenous Studies classrooms. The fact that knowledge is said to be reproduced through sociocultural contexts speaks to the notion that students who come into Indigenous Studies classrooms have already encountered considerable knowledge about Indigenous people generally in their lives. What is not evident here is the place of tacit knowledge (Polyani, 1966), which may result from the mental stowage of knowledge learnt in the day-to-day world.

In the discipline of Indigenous Studies, we are familiar with the mediated and partial nature of the verifiable record which creates rather than exposes relative truths. Ongoing scepticism about the Stolen Generation (Murphy, 2011); and the occurrence of Indigenous massacres (Windschuttle, 2000), are apparent subjectivities that are indeed based on historical records which have in many cases sought to deny or diminish both the occurrences and their aftermath. Nevertheless, these are two examples of topics where the accepted Indigenous truths are now being increasingly validated by empirical research (see for example, Ryan, 2020; Smith et al., 2017 in relation to Indigenous massacre sites).

## **The Study Design**

In the section above I charted the methodological underpinnings of the project to make explicit the epistemological foundations of the study. I now outline the methods used to conduct the research, recognising that:

Techniques and procedures are tools to be used by the researcher as he or she sees fit to solve methodological problems. There are not a set of directives to be rigidly adhered to. (Corbin, 2009, pp. 40-1)

The project started out as a reasonably straightforward qualitative study using the threshold concepts framework to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies. The topic focused on an area of interest to me and in a context in which I had both contacts and practitioner experience. However, as Maxwell (2012) presciently suggests:

You will need to continually assess how your design is actually working during the research and how it influences and is influenced by the context in which you're operating, and to make adjustments and changes so that your study can accomplish what you want. (p.3)

At each step of the project I reassessed and adjusted, whether to accommodate my personal circumstances (changing jobs at the end of my first year of candidature and again in the later stages of the study) or in response to an ideal but overly optimistic data collection method, which as I noted in a conference presentation in the second year of my candidature, was a spectacular failure. Consequently, below I outline my original intentions as well as the research as it was ultimately conducted. I do this in chronological

order, describing a research narrative (Silverman, 2005) as much as research design. I begin by outlining the unsuccessful pilot and then detail the technical aspects of the project such as obtaining human research ethics approval, data collection and recruitment and data analysis.

### **Project overview: A tale of two projects**

Unintentionally, this project had two distinct parts. I was interested in the use of naturally occurring data (Silverman, 2005) rather than automatically settling on interviews as the key source of information. For this study student assessments such as essays, or other written or creative summative task could fall into this category. Threshold concept researchers often use assessable written work as a source of data to determine whether their students understand key discipline knowledge (Fouberg, 2013; Orsini-Jones, 2008; Park & Light, 2010; Taylor, 2006). However, student written assessments such as essays are static. While it may be possible to identify concepts that students are misunderstanding, or not grasping at all; but an essay, quiz or exam is less illustrative of a student's *experience* of struggling to understand the course material. In effect, while assessment tasks may reflect what students have learned (in response to a defined task), such a task will tell us less about the *process* or *experience* of learning. In effect, while assessment tasks may reflect what students have learned (in response to a defined task), such a task will tell us less about the *process* or *experience* of learning. It is difficult to extrapolate from an assessment item what knowledge the learner has struggled with in the liminal space, or what they have done to work through the struggle. Even with reflective assessments many learners find it difficult to articulate their learning journeys. I was considering focusing my data collection on assessment tasks, which tends to drive learner engagement, but was also interested in capturing more immediate and experiential data.

Recognising that assessments can be drivers of key learning moments, my initial plan was to have students record their responses to a brief set of open-ended questions about their learning, *while* they were working on their assignments during a semester of Indigenous Studies learning. From my own experience I estimated that students would be required to complete two to three items of assessment during a session of study and that I planned ask participants to do the recordings at these points over the semester. By doing this I

aimed to capture data at the crucial period when students were likely to be constructing new knowledge and consequently potentially experiencing liminality. The data collection at two points was intended to chart a change over time, which might be suggestive of transformative learning having taken place.

For this reason, I originally chose to seek firsthand accounts from students as they undertook their assessment tasks. I devised five questions to prompt students to share their learning experiences over the course of a semester of study. The questions were designed to elicit detailed insight into how a learner's thinking changed, and what might have affected their thinking, including their own actions or those of educators or peers. My intention was to capture learners 'in the moment' as they focused on their study, with the potential "to show us things that are not currently imaginable" (Silverman, 2005, p. 120). Using (prompted) student reflections in this way also avoids the normative expectations of learning that are applied to essays such as writing conventions, for example. Additionally, I was interested in both the *cognitive* and *affective* processes involved. Using this method, I imagined, would allow me to examine the student's learning in response to the curriculum as it happens throughout the semester; to follow their development; and potentially determine if any transformation was occurring, as well as identifying potential threshold concepts.

A small pilot study was undertaken with students to ensure the method of data collection was feasible and to gauge the effectiveness of the questions. Students at three university sites in my locality were invited via email to self-record one set of responses to a set of open-ended questions, while they were working on an assigned assessment task. As it turned out, the pilot phase of the project suggested that it would be very difficult to get students to self-record. As Bazeley (2013) notes:

there are marked discrepancies between theory and practice when it comes to methods, and even more when researchers claim to be following a particular methodological tradition. (p.10)

Despite several learners signalling interest and contacting me to participate, ultimately only one student sent a recording. Follow-up emails to students failed to elicit any further responses, suggesting it was too onerous for learners to follow through on this method.

The difficulties, however, were not just in having students complete the recordings at critical junctures. The learner who did complete a recording answered the questions too briefly to yield much information and certainly not the rich data required for qualitative data analysis.

Consequently, I rethought the student data collection process. Having ascertained that the original method of data collection was not workable, I sought a minor amendment to my ethics application and was granted approval to do face-to-face interviews with students (original and amended learner Participant Information forms are in the thesis appendices and are referred to in the participant section below). I also interviewed a small group of educators about their understandings of challenges that students might experience in their Indigenous Studies classrooms, and a group of Elders about their understandings of what students should be learning in Indigenous Studies.

### **Human Research Ethics**

The field of Indigenous Research methodologies has grown considerably over the last two decades since Māori (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou) scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) so clearly articulated the objectification of Indigenous peoples in research, through the combined force of imperial gaze and colonial knowledge. Such research, across an array of disciplines, produced accounts which failed to accord with Indigenous understandings of ourselves or our situations (Nakata, 2007); and which also positioned Indigenous peoples as simultaneously primitive but trapped by projected notions of authenticity and positioning as an exotic essentialised other (Smith, 1999). The burgeoning field provides clear directions on research practice with Indigenous peoples (Brayboy et al., 2012; Chilisa, 2019; Wilson, 2003), and there are growing sets of national and local protocols to guide research undertakings. However, as Wagiman scholar Shay (2016) notes, there is less guidance for Indigenous researchers, particularly those working with Indigenous participants but located in non-Indigenous institutional (and, as I have argued earlier, colonial) contexts, as is the case for this study.

For this project I draw on the theorising of Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri scholar Rigney, (1999) who reminds us that Indigenist research should be Indigenous led; privilege Indigenous voices; and be emancipatory by furthering the “struggle of

Indigenous Australians for recognition of self-determination” (p. 116). The student participants in this study, as anticipated, were mostly non-Indigenous (outlined in further detail below); and the broad university context was undoubtedly non-Indigenous despite the specific context being the discipline of Indigenous Studies. I had planned to interview educators, recognising that while learners would have their own experiences and understandings to share, a classroom has two parties: students *and* teachers. This fits well with the threshold concepts framework which is said to be neither student nor teacher centred (Cousin, 2010). I decided that the educators I would seek as participants should be Indigenous, based on the premise that Indigenous people are well-placed to speak about our own experiences (Rigney, 2006; Smith, 1999) and that Indigenous Australian educators embody Indigenous knowledge and identity rather than being simply a representation of Indigeneity (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). Moreover, my Indigenous Studies networks largely comprise Indigenous academics, which I imagined would assist with garnering prospective study participants. Barradell (2013) suggests that threshold concepts identification should include consultation with stakeholder parties outside of the direct educational context to encompass the “wider professional community” (p.237). Although those comments were made in the context of a discipline with an external registering authority and a clear profession, the logical step for this research was to speak with Elders, as key Knowledge holders for Indigenous Australians and whose custodianship and care of those Knowledges (Haines et al., 2019) has brought us to this contemporary moment when university students must encounter Indigenous curricula in unprecedented ways.

This link to community and to professional practice is important in two ways. First, it takes us back to the third of Rigney’s features of Indigenist research — the ethos of liberation. Second, it led me to consider which stakeholders might be important to the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies. Indigenous Studies educators are community and future focused. One of the reasons that these educators persist with teaching Indigenous Studies, often in the face of an emotional load occasioned by resistant students, is because of their commitment to ensuring that students work more effectively with Indigenous communities and peoples as graduates (Asmar & Page, 2009; Behrendt et al., 2012). Arguably, with the right curriculum and learning taking place, Indigenous Studies graduates can contribute to the emancipatory goals of Indigenous Australians by better

understanding their own role in ongoing oppression and through improved practice in their professional lives. In that respect this is research that not only “arises from the long history of oppression of Indigenous Australians” (Rigney, p.116) but also potentially contributes to “cultural freedom in the future” (p.117).

### **Managing Risk and vulnerability in research**

Research participants who are at particular risk of exploitation or harm are considered vulnerable (Lange et al., 2013). Vulnerability can arise from membership of a group designated at risk or because of the particular context of the research (Luna, 2019). This project involves two populations commonly defined by Human Research Ethics Committees as potentially vulnerable; students, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The ethical principles of justice, respect for persons and beneficence are implied in the consideration of vulnerability which stems from:

lack of capacity to provide free and informed consent, with implications for processes of consent (respect for persons), the conditions under which recruiting vulnerable participants is justified (justice), and the assessment of risks and benefits for these populations (beneficence). (Racine & Bracken-Roche, 2018, p. 21)

Vulnerability requires the researcher to consider both burden and benefit, issues further confounded by unequal power relations and cultural difference (Zion et al., 2000). In order to manage power inequities as well as any potential conflicts of interest in relation to the student participants, I made the decision not to research with my own students or students in my home institution. This undoubtedly made the research more complicated in terms of logistics (discussed in further detail below), however it did address the issue of vulnerability for students. For participating learners, it was clear that I was not their teacher and therefore did not have any responsibility for or access to student grades or substantive educational outcomes. I took some other less obvious steps to equalise the power relationship when I met with students, for example, considering my style of dress and the places where I met with students. I would normally dress quite formally when visiting another university, however in this case I dressed less formally, as I might in my own classrooms. While this may seem minor it is an example of self-reflexivity and

knowing myself, but also of considering my actions through the eyes of the student participants (Bold, 2011). I also gave the learner participants options for where the interviews would take place. Ultimately the potential vulnerability of students participating in the research did not seem to be an issue either for the participating learners or their universities. Rather it was the Indigenous aspects of the project which drew the attention of university authorities. In relation to the ethical protocols for the project, these two groups, students and Indigenous people, required checks and balances beyond the usual protocols.

The ethical guidelines for research with Indigenous peoples rightly highlight particular considerations for working with Indigenous peoples and communities, reflecting a history of over-research (Martin, 2003; Smith, 2012); objectification (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016); and exclusion from the products of research (Rigney, 2001). The primary focus of this research was the largely non-Indigenous students undertaking Indigenous Studies courses. However, as noted above, the project also included working with Indigenous educators and a group of Aboriginal Elders and whilst not specifically targeted, did include some Indigenous learners studying Indigenous Studies. The project has been guided by the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies<sup>10</sup> (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012). According to the AIATSIS guidelines:

It is essential that Indigenous people are full participants in research projects that concern them, ... and that research with and about Indigenous peoples must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and Indigenous people. (AIATSIS, 2012, p 4)

In this case, I had existing networks with Indigenous colleagues and community Elders which I was able to deploy for this project. I felt an additional (and perhaps unnecessary) responsibility not to pressure my colleagues to support my research, although ultimately I did use university teaching sites where I had established contacts. Below I outline the ways in which I engaged with the AIATSIS guidelines.

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<sup>10</sup> These guidelines have been revised since I began my study and were updated in 2020 to the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (the AIATSIS Code).

## **Consultation**

For the purposes of this study my community includes Indigenous colleagues teaching in Indigenous centres (who are responsible for teaching Australian Indigenous Studies) and Indigenous colleagues more generally who are involved in Indigenous Higher Education. In relation to consultation and meaningful engagement, outlined in the AIATSIS Guidelines for ethical research with Indigenous Australians, I began discussing the project with these colleagues prior to enrolling in the PhD program. This included the sorts of informal discussions that occur in tea rooms as well as two formal presentations. While deliberating about and refining my thinking about the use of the threshold concepts framework, two colleagues gave me opportunities to give presentations to audiences with significant Indigenous representation (see Appendix A) where I received useful feedback on my evolving work. I used these two presentations to test the idea of threshold concepts on Indigenous academic audiences and to hone my thinking on the nature of the Indigenous studies classroom. In both cases members of the audiences (colleagues deeply engaged with Indigenous Studies teaching and learning) were interested and enthusiastic. Memorably, on a bus ride to the airport following the second presentation, there was an excited conversation with two colleagues about the novelty of the threshold concepts framework with which neither were familiar.

## **Reciprocity**

In keeping with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Research in Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS, 2012) reciprocity was built into the project from the outset. In the spirit of the AIATSIS guidelines, all participants were compensated for their time with a \$30 gift voucher (enabled by my consultancy fund resulting from work undertaken as an external evaluator on learning and teaching projects, not from Higher Degree Research funds). Although not all the study participants were Indigenous Australians, some recompense for time is consistent with the general ethical guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). Students may also have benefitted from engaging in the research experience, which is increasingly seen as important for undergraduates as well as honours or postgraduate research students (Wayment & Dickson, 2008).

I initially planned to undertake a series of presentations to Indigenous colleagues; to present at a range of conferences; and to publish papers through the course of PhD study, as well as to develop a teaching resource arising from the identification of the threshold concepts. In practice, however, particularly for the educators, reciprocity developed and was reconfigured over the course of the data collection phase of the project in an organic way that made sense for my participant group and the skills I had to offer. For example, I provided advice and feedback to one colleague who was drafting a paper for publication, and in another case I accepted a request to be part of a course review. In yet another case I agreed to do a lecture for students. Such activities are difficult to list for Human Research Ethics Committees keen to discharge their responsibilities when considering reciprocity. However, they are the types of genuine, contextual acts of reciprocity which the AIATSIS guidelines envisage, albeit activities that are not always possible to indicate prior to the research being undertaken. The project has Human Research Ethics approval from the Australian National University (2015/154, approved June 2015).

## **Data Collection**

### **Conducting research on university campuses**

I understood from my previous work as a member of a university Human Research Ethics Committee that researchers wishing to undertake research with university students should first seek the permission of the university's Deputy Vice Chancellor Research (DVCR) before commencing the project. This ended up being a somewhat circular predicament, because institutional permission ideally should be sought before contacting staff or students, yet the researcher does not know if staff or students will in fact wish to participate. Initially I chose not to utilise my existing networks of colleagues, many of whom work in Indigenous Studies teaching contexts, as I was concerned about the issue of undue influence. This meant that I followed appropriate protocols to seek permission from the institution before engaging with staff. In practice this meant seeking DVC permission at some universities at which there were eventually no participants. Recognising that gaining the relevant permissions could take time to achieve and be unrewarding in terms of outcome, I decided to start with universities in New South Wales (NSW), my home state, that I had identified, through a university handbook search, as teaching introductory Indigenous Studies. This would potentially provide a range of

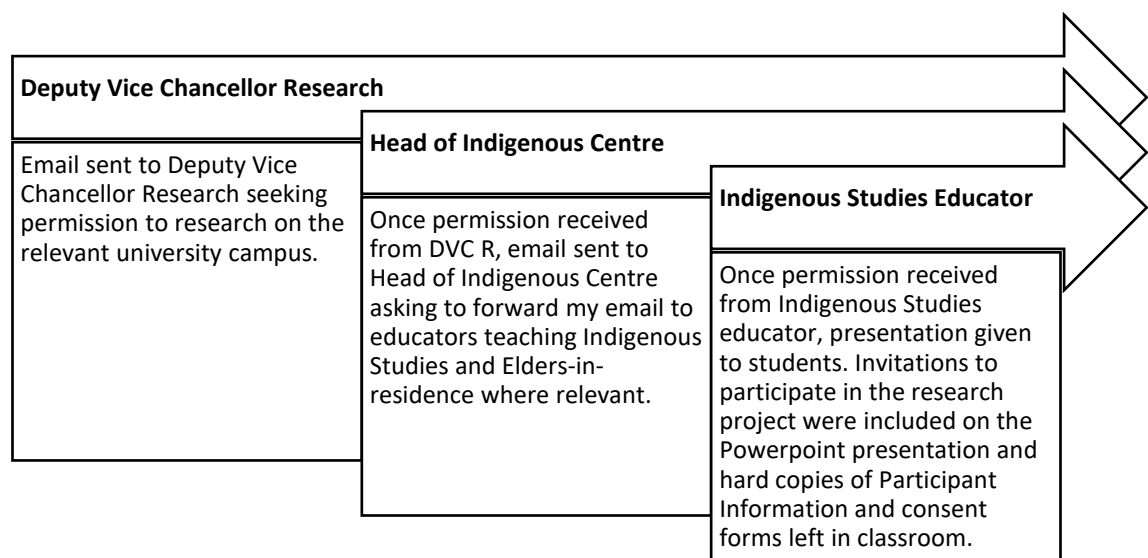
institutions, enough sites, and was feasible in terms of travel. In some of these universities I also knew teaching staff.

### **The Politics of Access: layers of gatekeeping**

Research related to student learning in Indigenous Studies is commonly undertaken with an academic's own students (Bullen & Roberts, 2018; Kickett et al., 2014; Thorpe & Burgess, 2016). Practically, working with students you are teaching or have recently taught makes considerable sense. Ethical approval is relatively straight forward, through the researcher's own institution; there is potentially an existing rapport; and funds are not required for travel. There were two reasons, however, why I chose not to work with my own students. First, to avoid the potential bias and conflict of interest that might stem from working with students to whom I was known and for whom I had grading responsibility. Secondly, I wanted to work with a range of students in different settings to enhance the strength of my findings. If my findings were similar across a set of unrelated groups and triangulated through data from a range of sources (learners and educators), then both (qualitative) validity and reliability would be satisfied (Trotter, 2012). I also hoped that not having a prior relationship might mean that students who were struggling with the subject matter in Indigenous Studies might be more inclined to participate, as I had no connection to their teaching or grades.

**Figure 1.**

#### *University Permission and Participant Recruitment Process*



Ultimately the research did attract students but accessing students proved much more complicated than I had anticipated. The recruitment process (summarised in Figure 1 above) involved a three-step process starting with attaining permission to undertake research on a university's campus; gaining the assistance of the senior Indigenous appointment in the university; and finally receiving support from the Indigenous educator teaching an Indigenous Studies class.

### **Gatekeeping level one: The Deputy Vice Chancellors Research**

An initial email requesting permission to conduct research with learners, educators, and Elders (see Appendix B) was sent to each of the identified NSW institutions' Deputy Vice Chancellor Research (DVCR). What happened next was largely unanticipated, beyond expecting that it might take time for busy DVCR's to respond to my correspondence. The permission process proved complex and, in some cases, convoluted. I initially requested permission from the relevant DVCR at nine NSW universities based on geographic location and minimising field work costs. I was not seeking ethical approval, as the project already had ethical approval from my home university, but rather, I was seeking permission from the DVC to conduct research at their institution. Of the nine NSW universities first contacted, seven eventually gave approval for the research to be undertaken with their students, although in some cases after considerable negotiation. Of the remaining universities, one did not grant permission, and one required significant amendment to the ethics protocol which, for pragmatic time-saving reasons, I did not undertake. This institution required full ethical review of an already approved project as outlined in the following correspondence:

Thank you for your application. It will be processed this week and will be put before the full Committee for review at the HREC Meeting... (Research Ethics Manager).

Another university also applied an ethics process as well as requiring their university logo to be added to the participant consent forms. In most cases, institutions sought advice from their Indigenous Centres as the following example email from a Deputy Vice Chancellor Research illustrates:

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I acknowledge your email request to undertake research with staff and undergraduate students at [University X]. I have referred this to [Head of Indigenous Centre] who has advised me that you will be meeting with [them] in July to discuss it further. We will communicate our decision to you after that meeting.

In one institution my request went to the DVC who forwarded it to the Head of the Indigenous Centre, who then forwarded it to the Indigenous person who served on the ethics committee. In contrast, at another university the ethics manager indicated that they were not aware of any directive to seek institutional permission before conducting research on campus, directing me as follows:

Staff and student access is outlined in our email policy. The usual step though is to advertise via appropriate channels and/or to contact relevant Schools or Departments with the request and quoting your ethics approval. (Research Ethics Manager).

In many cases the DVCR, or their delegates who I had contact with, sought to be helpful, with some offering to support recruitment by providing a list of staff. This generally supportive approach is best reflected by the following email:

... [University X] is committed to conducting and supporting high quality research. To undertake research involving our staff or students you will need to ensure you have the appropriate approvals from an Australian human research ethics committee (HREC) ... No further approvals need to be obtained...

Interestingly, no DVCR or ethics committee raised any specific concerns about access to students. If students as a group require special treatment (Wiles et al., 2007) in the form of permission from the institutional authorities, presumably one might expect at least some acknowledgement of their role in the research. It is unclear whether a lack of response in relation to students was because the institutions considered that responsibility was devolved to the Indigenous Centre, by delegating the question of access to the Centre, or whether my research protocol was thorough enough to allay any concerns. A third possibility is that once the request was designated as Indigenous, the question of students'

rights were subjugated to the more sensitive concerns about Indigenous research (Paradies, 2016) which were hastily delegated to the Indigenous Centres.

### **Gatekeeping level two: Indigenous Centres**

Once I had gained permission to research on a particular campus, I emailed the senior Indigenous staff member in the university – usually the Head of the Indigenous Centre at that time – asking them to forward my research request to their staff teaching introductory Indigenous Studies (Appendix C). While the students I was seeking to recruit to my study were the largely non-Indigenous students undertaking an Indigenous Studies subject, the teaching of these subjects is commonly delivered by staff in Indigenous Centres. Gaining permissions from the Heads of Indigenous Centres proved equally thorny. From the seven possible sites, I received expressions of interest in assisting with the research from Indigenous academics at 3 universities, and from one additional university where I had not yet had approval. In that case the academic had heard about the project via email from a colleague (research was not undertaken at this site). In two cases the Head of Centre gave their approval for me to recruit for students, but the teaching staff member was unresponsive.

The difficulties at this level related to two other issues; the question of benefit to the Centre and the inflexibility of protocols designed to ‘protect’ Indigenous students from being over-researched. In keeping with the AIATSIS Guidelines on ethical research with Indigenous peoples outlined above, the two Centres I approached felt unable to allow access to their students because they had protocols in place which either explicitly prevented research with students, or sought direct benefit. In one case, the absence of being able to show a direct benefit to the Centre, for example through survey results which might have positively reflect the Centre’s teaching, meant the research was not supported. The Centre Head was suggesting a conditional form of access (Murgatroyd et al., 2015) dependent on a specific benefit to the Centre rather than to the research participants themselves. Notes from my methodological journal reflect my thinking at the time. While I did consider the possibility of undertaking a survey for this purpose, it presented a conundrum of the kind that are not uncommon in research (Maxwell, 2012; Silverman, 2003). I knew the survey research would take more time for development and may be complicated by results that were not acceptable to the Centre. If I included the survey

results in my current study, I would need to complete an amendment to the existing ethics protocol. Moreover, I wondered if I would then need to offer the same opportunity to other Centres, adding further complexity. I also suspected that the survey, as proposed, would do little to contribute to my understanding of students' learning. Ultimately, I made the decision to not to undertake the survey based on these pragmatic as well as methodological considerations, forgoing a research site with hundreds of potential student participants.

The number of studies with Indigenous students (Hollinsworth et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2008; Oliver et al., 2016; Shah & Widin; 2010) would suggest that there is some reason for caution in this area, although it is less clear how relevant this prudence is for non-Indigenous students who come under the jurisdiction of Indigenous Centres, particularly as it is most likely that those students are completing the majority of their studies in other discipline areas. Arguably, taking the decision-making out of students' hands reduces adults to the level of children, unable to make informed decisions for themselves (Shay, 2016). At the sites where permission was granted, the many students who did not elect to participate in the research ably demonstrated their capacity to choose. Ultimately, I received permission to research at four universities.

## **Participants**

The participants in this research were educators delivering introductory Indigenous Studies curriculum, and mostly learners enrolled in their units of study who volunteered to participate in study. A group of Indigenous elders was also interviewed. I sought to interview a variety of participants in each category to maximise the potential for garnering a range of views (Bazeley, 2013). This meant that I sought learners and educators from a range of universities and contexts. The participant characteristics are described below. Further explanation of the learner characteristics, including participant pseudonyms, is in chapter four where I explore findings in relation to the participants more fully. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Participants were offered the opportunity to receive and modify their transcripts. All transcription was completed by a transcription service under confidential conditions.

## **Learners**

Eventually, 11 students from four different universities, in three different states, were interviewed. The universities included older, more established ‘sandstone’ institutions and more recently established institutions. All universities were in large cities. Of the 11 students, nine were non-Indigenous, including one who was an international student on exchange from a European country of origin and two identified as Aboriginal. However, three of the local students had either been born and lived overseas or had families who had been born overseas. All students were over 18 years of age with an age range from 20 years of age to 60 years. In two institutions students were recruited via the interviewed educators. In the third case the students were recruited following a chance conversation with a non-Indigenous colleague about challenges I was having attracting students to the research. In this instance, I did some teaching in the classroom, both as a gesture of reciprocity and as a way to allow students to become familiar with me outside of the research context. All learner recruitment was done via a presentation to the class about the research (see Appendix D). The presentation included my contact details and an invitation to contact me if the student was interested in participating in the study. Participant information and consent forms were also left in the classroom (Appendix E). Learners were interviewed on campus and in one case via skype. I used a semi-structured interview schedule which included brief demographic questions, such as age and questions about their learning in Indigenous Studies (see Appendix F for interview schedule detail).

## **Educators**

I interviewed seven educators in Indigenous Studies, from a variety of universities nationally. The seven educators interviewed were from six different universities in three states. The final makeup of the respondents was dependent on self-selection and in practice relied on both snowball (Naderifar et al., 2017) and purposive (Silverman, 2005) sampling. For example, in an institution that I contacted, and had permission to research in, the Head of the Indigenous Centre sent my invitation out to an email network which resulted in a colleague that I knew from another university contacting me to be involved in the research. In another case a colleague I met at a conference offered access to her students, which meant I then initiated the process of getting permission from the DVC

Research. Following informed consent (see Appendix G), a semi-structured interview schedule was used to identify educators' understandings of the key concepts in Indigenous Studies, and what they thought students found challenging (see Appendix H). The questionnaire sought to elicit information related to areas of student misunderstanding and challenge (Kiley & Wisker, 2009) as well as how we might, as discipline educators, recognise mastery in Australian Indigenous Studies. One educator whose institution I did not have permission to research in, but was part of my collegial network, was interviewed off-campus after volunteering. Another educator was happy to have their students invited to participate in the research but did not take up the option to be interviewed themselves.

Each of the Indigenous educators were asked if they were willing to allow me to do a short presentation to students inviting them to be involved in the research (consent was then obtained from individual students on a voluntary basis). My details were supplied and interested students were asked to contact me via email initially. In some cases, the PowerPoint presentation used in the classroom was made available to students on the learning management platform for the relevant course.

### **Elders**

I might have looked to professional bodies such as Aboriginal organisations for the outside-of-curriculum stakeholders. However, in the absence of a single professional body, it seemed appropriate to first seek the input from Elders. I had originally hoped to interview Elders in the universities where I was interviewing students and staff. Many universities now have Elders in Residence, and this seemed a logical way to canvass the rich experience of this group external to the curriculum and discipline. However, it became apparent quite quickly that, with the challenges I was experiencing getting permissions from universities to access staff and students, this was a layer of complexity that could impede the project. I decided to seek an alternative solution. With the help of an Indigenous community member with whom I had an existing relationship, and who I knew had university experience, I was able to connect with an Elders group from a local (to Sydney) regional Aboriginal Corporation. Permission was granted from the Chief Executive Officer of the organisation following consultation with the group's Management Committee. This meant that I could be assured of a range of views whilst

not further complicating the already complex university data collection. Nine Elders were interviewed in total, eight in a focus group—at their request—and one Elder, who missed the focus group, was interviewed alone. All the interviews took place on the same day. The Elders were interviewed in the organisation’s meeting room. I brought food for morning tea which we shared, and I stayed for lunch, meeting and talking informally with Elders and other members of the organisation, including a community member I had known as a student, who dropped in to see me.

Interviewing with the Elders turned out to be a lively and wide-ranging discussion. The data collection was somewhat unpredictable in that I was not sure how many of the Elders group would be interested in talking to me and I felt I needed to be prepared to speak with whoever wanted to join the conversation. My previous experience doing qualitative interviews is that, whether a semi-structured interview schedule is used or not, people will tell you what they feel you need to hear. Although I had not intended necessarily to use Bessarab & Ng’andu’s (2010) *yarning* as a method, their point here is salient:

One of the challenges for qualitative researchers when listening to stories of lived experience is that the teller decides what parts of their story to tell and which parts to leave out, the researcher’s role is to draw out the parts they are interested in which may not be told and which relate to the research topic. (pp. 38-39)

I would argue that, when undertaking exploratory research, broad discussion is not particularly problematic and that the central feature of qualitative interviewing is gathering the story that the researcher hears, which reflects the lived experience of the participant rather than the preconceptions of the researcher or related theory. I asked one broad question related to what the Elders thought students should learn about when studying Indigenous Studies at university. In this case I felt that had I attempted to direct the conversation more overtly, I would have been disrespectful to the Elders. Respect for Elders is an important part of Indigenous cultures and I was mindful of my position as a guest in their space. Unsurprisingly, had I been more directive I may have missed two threads in the ‘yarn’—story, and truth, which have proven crucial to my findings. All the Elders completed formal consent processes.

## Data analysis

Data management and analysis were undertaken with NVivo (version 11) software. Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) can increase the rigour of qualitative research and is particularly helpful when managing large data sets (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). All the transcribed text was coded using labels, and often a single passage was coded with a number of labels allowing for later analysis using matrix intersections and Boolean searches (Miles et al., 2014). Coding functions like an index in a book (Bazeley, 2013), in that it facilitates the location of data as well as deeper analysis and data visualisation (Nowell et al., 2017) than is possible with manual coding. The improvements in NVivo since I used it some years prior meant that I was able to make notes and analyse as I coded, through memos. Numerous questions arose as I coded and memos were made which documented the question, the literature it related to and ideas for follow-up.

I used both inductive and deductive methods to analyse the transcript data gathered for this research. Using both these approaches allowed me to use the theory of the threshold concepts framework to deductively (Creswell, 2003; Elo et al., 2014) search the data for related elements such as troublesome knowledge or liminality and also to inductively code emergent themes (Silverman, 2005) within the data. Each section of a participant's transcript was coded for chunks of meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Namey et al., 2008) in the data. The transcripts were analysed using an iterative process (Bazeley, 2013) with a "continuous process of shifting back and forth" (Willis & Trondman, 2002, p.339) between the inductive and deductive processes. I analysed the data with the overarching threshold concepts theory and the underpinning constructivist and sociocultural theories, outlined above, in mind.

I use 'thick description', a term first used by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the early 1970s who was interested in the context of individual actions and how the surrounding context might change the meaning of an event (Ponterotto, 2006). The idea was taken up by anthropologist Geertz (1973) to explain the intellectual work of meaning making involved in ethnography. In this study I often use long participant quotes to allow the reader to determine the credibility of my analysis and the meaning I am deriving from the

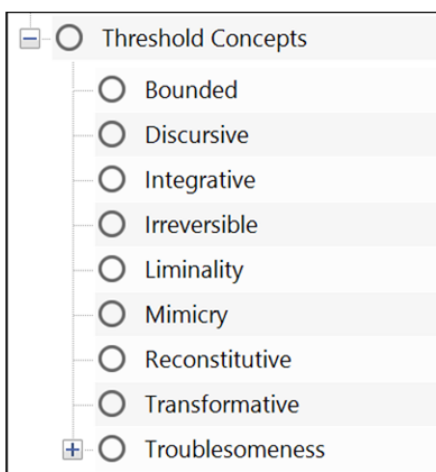
quoted text (Ponterotto, 2006) but also to enable the voices, emotions and doubts of the participants to be heard (Denzin, 1989).

## Exploring the coding process

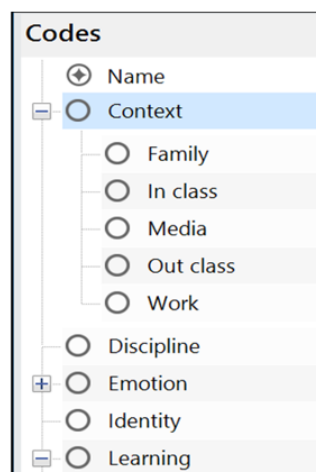
The NVivo software program allows for the creation of both adult and child nodes, which facilitates hierarchical aggregation of data at a broadly labelled single node, with concomitant disaggregated data coded to elements of the broad code. As Bazeley (2013) suggests, I also used “specific labels for passages of data rather than labels that point to a general class of things being described” (p. 158). In my coding schema some of the nodes were designated according to theory, for example, there is an overarching node called threshold concepts with child nodes for each of the features of a threshold concept (illustrated in Figure 2 below). With sociocultural theory in mind, I created nodes that reflected various contexts participants spoke about—topics such as ‘in the classroom’ or ‘out of class’ or family (Figure 2). The use of the child notes allowed me to look at each feature separately but also to have the possibility of exploring the combined data at the parent node.

**Figure 2.**

*Coding schema examples*



Note: Threshold concepts parent and child nodes.



Note: Example emergent coding schema.

As well, however, I also created nodes in a more grounded theory manner as they emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, when I saw text which indicated that students were taking responsibility for their learning, I used the code agency. I also created a node for emotions. Other codes arose from ideas I had been pondering from when I did the initial interviews, ideas like story which repeated in a range of ways across interviews. The idea of truth, raised by an Elder and reflected in scholarly (Adams et al., 2018; Bond, 2021) national Indigenous dialogue about truth-telling (Allam & Evershed, 2019) stayed with me from the day of interview and was certainly in my thinking as I coded.

I began the project with an interest in identifying threshold concepts in Indigenous Studies, thinking that liminality may account for some of the resistant learner behaviour I was seeing in the classroom and which was evident in the literature. While I do tentatively suggest a threshold concept, my data analysis led me to a much more specific focus on liminality and more particularly the idea of liminality as a rite of passage. I was particularly interested in liminality and was familiar with the features of liminality and with its characterisation as experience of challenge (Meyer & Land, 2005; 2006) while learning. As I coded, though, I became aware that when students were asked about challenge that they often spoke about absences and gaps in their own knowledge rather than what ideas or course content they found challenging.

This emergent idea was familiar, and similar to the ideas of the great Australian silence outlined in chapters one and two. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, yet I was perplexed that learners should be so concerned with what they did not know. I expand on these ideas in the findings chapters but critically, this puzzling led me back to the literature on liminality. Was this expression of absence simply an expression of the emotive aspect of liminality or something more? Dissatisfied with the way that my data analysis was proceeding, I returned to Meyer and Land's (2003; 2005) original liminality work. A fresh (re)reading led me to further explore the idea of liminality as a rite of passage and in turn I came across a threshold concepts paper which dealt specifically with liminality as a rite of passage (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015); a pivotal moment for my analysis.

## **Sharpening the focus on Liminality: rites of passage**

It may seem somewhat ironic to use an anthropologically derived lens to explore (predominantly) non-Indigenous students' learning in Indigenous Studies, given the contested history of anthropological research in the discipline of Indigenous Studies (Cowlshaw, 1992; Nakata, 2007). The historical contribution of anthropology to the global colonial project has been a cause of disciplinary angst both in Australia (Gibson, 2013; McGregor, 2002; Morton, 2004) and internationally (Hale, 2006; Ramos, 1991, Said, 1978). Anthropology is not alone in this historical thirst for examination of Indigenous peoples. However, the discipline has a special place in the decolonising literature because of the subsequent implication of the canon in widespread misunderstanding of Indigenous people's intellectual capacity and cultural expression, associated with the colonial project (Nakata, 2007; Smith, 2012). Yet Meyer and Land (2005), in using the term liminality, were aiming to capture both the period of transition that can occur before understanding occurs and the transformation that can transpire through the learning of complex disciplinary concepts.

For me, the liminality aspect of the threshold concepts framework created the prospect of deeper exploration of challenge and resistance in Indigenous Studies learners, through the notion of learning as a rite of passage which in turn seemed to fit with what I was observing in the combined dataset. Ultimately, I was able to identify a threshold concept which seemed to catalyse the liminal journey for learners. Liminality is a commonly examined aspect of the threshold concepts framework (Hall et al., 2018; Land et al., 2014; Rattray, 2016), although the focus is often on the aspect of troublesomeness (Adler-Kassner, 2012; Moellar & Fawns, 2018). Hawkins and Edward's (2015) detailed rendering of the three phases of liminality—preliminality, liminality and postliminality—in their study of learning challenges, characterised as liminal monsters, for business and management undergraduate students' uncertainty when considering leadership practice, was particularly illuminating. The paper led me back to the original rites of passage theorisation. Examining van Gennep's (1960) original work and Turner's (1969) later scholarship around liminality helped me to make new sense of the experiences of learning students were sharing with me through the study. According to van Gennep (1960) all rites of passage have three distinct phases:

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preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated. (p.11)

Reconnected to the overarching idea of a rite of passage, liminality becomes more than a site of struggle through which students might pass prior to a transformative learning experience, and more like a staged, though not necessarily linear, *process* of a learning journey. Moreover, what is captivating about considering this learning journey in Indigenous Studies as a rite of passage is the way in which it accounts for both the cognitive and emotive aspects of the learner experience. The rite of passage conceptualisation also allows theoretical consideration for the educators as hosts of the liminal journey (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015), and the Elders as representatives of the new knowledge to be gained by the learners. While the notion of learning as a trajectory is a familiar metaphor in the learning and teaching lexicon (Catterall et al., 2014; Jasman, 2010), the concept of learning journeys is less theorised (Wilder & Lillvist, 2018).

It is impossible now to read the original works of van Gennep and Turner without hearing the echo of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's landmark *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999; 2012) work. Smith's (2012) overt characterisation of western research as colonial imperialism spawned the much-repeated mantra that research is "one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (p.1). van Gennep's (1960) work is particularly disquieting with its characterisation of "higher to lower levels of civilisations" (p. 1) and the "downwards on the scale of civilisation" (p. 2). These deeply held convictions about the people they studied permeated their work in ways that belie objectivity, yet these are the traces of thinking that in fact infect our learner's thinking and the understandings of wider society. To a modern reader the sexism and racism are breathtaking but the conception of the rite of passage as a transitory period of uncertainty and disorientation capped by a transformation resonated with the data I was analysing. A turbulent but transitory period accounted well for the learner experiences of undertaking Indigenous Studies; the educators' observations of student behaviour and expressions of their teaching practice; as well as the Elders' notion of truth as an issue of national importance to be realised through university curricula. In the next chapter, I begin to explore the

liminal journey through the experiences of the participants, starting with the pre-liminal phase of the rite of passage.

## Chapter 4 Preliminality: Beginning the Liminal Journey

*...everyone has a particular story of how they got to their learning at that moment (Jane, educator).*

In the vast discursive landscape of teaching and learning theory, it is possible to lose sight of individual learners. Consistent with the theorisation of a rite of passage, new learners are rendered indistinguishable and known through familiar broad labels (Turner, 1964), such as mature-aged, first year, and school leaver. In the interests of theoretical advancement, we speak about educators and students as homogenous assemblages rather than as individuals with multiple experiences, influences, and aspirations. Classes, classrooms, assessment, and evaluations become singular entities, papering over the minutiae that make up these generalised amalgams. This is not to devalue universalising scholarship. Indeed, this thesis will, in the final analysis, come to global findings and implications, but first I will focus on individual student and educator voices to explore learning and teaching in Australian Studies. I examine more closely Meyer and Land's (2003) conceptualisation of the liminal space as a rite of passage, with a focus on the pre-liminal phase of the process, setting the foundations for the later findings chapters on the liminal and post-liminal (transformative) phase of learning. To do this, I explore the original anthropological work which informed the threshold concepts framework and draw on more recent work by Hawkins and Edwards (2015) that applies a liminality perspective to the student experience of doubt and uncertainty in the context of leadership education.

The original threshold concepts work (Meyer & Land, 2005) drew on the work of folklorist van Gennep (1960), whose colonial observations of peoples in African nations led to the theorising of rites of passage in relation to socio-developmental milestones such as birth, marriage, and puberty; and an anthropologist, Turner (1969), whose work develops the idea of rites of passage by focusing on the role of ritual in creating communal experiences which support an individual's transition through liminal life phases. Turner's (1979) work is particularly relevant, as his interest in secret and sacred rituals waned, shifting to studies of public rituals like theatre or carnivals, in which society comes together to examine its values and ideals, particularly in times of social change. The notion of *communitas* includes both the possibility of new horizons and fresh directions

but also risk (Kapferer, 2019). As we will see, all three possibilities transpire for some of the learners who participated in this study. Risk was also evident to the educators.

Meyer and Land (2003) were particularly interested in the notion of liminality, which seemed to reflect the difficulty some students have in grasping abstract concepts in a discipline. Liminality seemed to account for the transformative potential of grasping this new knowledge, as well as the associated struggle with complexity and the irreversibility of subsequent perception, endangered by the fresh understanding. Also resonant with the metaphor of liminality was the potential for mimicry during this liminal period, for example, in the way that adolescents can act like adults, and then regress, as they navigate the trajectory to adulthood (2003). While Meyer and Land were explicit about the application of the anthropological work, much of the subsequent threshold concepts work has focused on the more singular idea of liminality as a period of struggle preceding a transformative learning experience. The preliminal phase of learning garners less attention from the literature, beyond the frequent references to Turner's (1969) notion of "betwixt and between" (p. 359), to signal a state of uncertainty associated with liminality. In contrast, Hawkins and Edwards' work (2015), focusing on learning in a leadership course as a rite of passage, resonated strongly with what I was seeing in the learner interview data from this study.

As we will see in the later chapters, the findings of this research suggest that the liminal phase is most pronounced for this group of students, while the findings in relation to the postliminal or transformation phase are similarly engaging, placing the liminal experience in a pedagogically useful context. Consequently, there is value in examining more closely the preliminal phase and the notion of separation for students, and indeed, the role of educators as the hosts of the liminal journey (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). It is this preliminal phase that signals the challenges to come and may be a critical, overlooked period, which if better understood, could contribute to enhanced educator and learner experiences. Indeed, characterising the beginning of study in Indigenous Studies as a separation may have explanatory appeal in terms of understanding student behaviour in the early weeks of their study, which might in turn affect how and perhaps even what, we teach.

The chapter begins with a deeper examination of the students' starting point to elicit an enhanced understanding of this separation phase, followed by a discussion of the idea of separation as it relates to the preliminal phase of the threshold concepts framework. The discussion of separation involves an exploration of what is separated from, as well as what is journeyed towards. In order to consider separation, it is necessary to illustrate where students begin, including their previous experiences, which are likely to affect their experience of the liminality and transformation. Further, I make the argument that learners *and* educators of Indigenous Studies find themselves in overlapping spaces of liminality, as already outlined, but also in a second space; the cultural interface (Nakata, 2006). The confluence and congruence of the metaphoric spaces of the cultural interface, and the liminal space, create an overlapping theoretical backdrop to the individualised introductions to the learners and educators.

### **Preliminarity: the rite of separation**

van Gennep (1960) suggested that there is a range of different types of rites of passage. However, these rites all have in common a phase of transition or shift from one state to another (Turner, 1969). At the heart of the rite is the neophyte beginning a journey, which culminates in a change of status, often of a higher order (van Gennep, 1960). In cultural and societal rites of passage these changes of status might include the shift from child to adult, or single to married. More contemporary rites of passage might include the getting of a driver's licence, a much-anticipated rite for many young people, with a concomitant elevation of status to that of driver (Kirby et al., 2011). Separation is the initial part of the journey. The section that follows explores the idea of separation in more detail. I examine three aspects of separation: detachment, status change, and humility. First, though, I look in some detail at who this group of learners are before they become neophyte Indigenous Studies students, to make clearer what students are separating from and who they are before they become novice Indigenous Studies learners. Separation also suggests a shift to a new space, which leads to a discussion of this new space, which I characterise by drawing on Nakata's notion of the cultural interface.

The separation phase of the rite of passage is characterised by a detachment that leads to a change of state or "statuslessness" (Turner, 1969, p.361). The neophytes entering this stage learn humility in order to "temper their pride" (p.361) as they progress to the next

phase. These three elements of the separation phase—detachment, status change, and humility—of the rite of passage are explored in further detail below. The separation phase of the liminal passage has several features that resonate with learners’ experiences of beginning Indigenous Studies. Exploration of these elements leads to the naming of the space, not just as a passage but as a specific kind of space, a cultural interface.

### **Starting points of learning**

The student participants in this study came to their Indigenous Studies classes from different beginning points in two critical ways—personal and institutional. I start here by outlining the student participants in some detail to help illuminate what it is that learners are separating from; and the experiences, both tacit and overt, that they bring with them to the classroom. A learner’s individual history and background is likely to be “significant to the evolution and outcome of a transformative experience” (Cranton & Roy, p.36). While learners enter the Indigenous Studies classroom as novices with a sense of uncertainty and amalgamation of identity as they become part of an “homogenised whole” (Turner, 1969, p. 177). As they separate from their usual student roles, there is also considerable variation in understanding and experience that students bring to the classroom. Meyer, Land and their colleague Davies (2008), suggest that there were at least two types of variation, *subliminal* and *preliminal variation*, that are relevant to the preliminary phase of the rite of passage (2008).

Subliminal variation aligns with the epistemologies of ignorance outlined earlier, which suggests that an individual’s understanding of a topic is affected by earlier and sometimes deeply ingrained understandings (Fredholm et al., 2020; Marton & Booth, 1997). Those understandings may be either through tacit knowledge or mindset (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015), which can affect initial perceptions or how learners approach their initial learning (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008). Educators are aware of this variation. Educator, Cara suggests, *we’re going to have students that have no idea, or have got a range of preconceived ideas*, with Luke (educator) noting, *I suppose everyone’s got their defences up at the beginning of semester*. This variation in learner prior experiences and knowledge, particularly if it is different from an educator’s knowledge or understanding of particular phenomena, can lead to misunderstandings in learning (Cheng, 2016). In the case of an Indigenous Studies learning environment, this mismatch between educator as expert, and

student, is often compounded by the teacher's own lived experiences as an Indigenous Australian.

While all students will bring their unique set of experiences, the range and volume of this experience will differ between school leavers (those who have gone to university directly from school) and students who have come to university as mature age entrants, having already had a degree of work and 'life' experiences. In some ways, this is a simplistic way to distinguish between groups of students. Younger students have also had life experiences, albeit accumulated over a shorter period of time, yet it is risky to underestimate the effect of those life experiences on their learning. This becomes clearer below as we learn more about the individual learners. Educators are aware of the need to harness this prior knowledge in their teaching, as Mary indicates:

...we're actually continually asking to reflect on who they are and what they bring to this learning process, because they're not empty vessels. They come with a body of knowledge. We need to work with that body of knowledge.

### **Introducing the learners**

Students at university are often characterised by a variety of labels, such as mature-aged, school leavers, domestic, or international. More than half of the learners in the study had come to their studies later in life. Alice<sup>11</sup>, John, Kelly, Mark, Melissa, and Julie were all mature-aged learners who had come to study with considerable work and life experience. All are parents. I did not specifically ask about families, but it was information each shared during interviews, and which in various ways was relevant to their individual learning experiences. Transitions and transformations for some participants in this group were closely aligned to their sense of themselves as parents and the responsibilities they perceived for their offspring. Amelia, Tania, Jessica, and Lara are all recent school leavers, although at varying stages of their degrees. Maree<sup>12</sup>, the first learner participant and only student to record an interview, was a school leaver. Tania and Mark identified as Aboriginal Australians. All the study learners were enrolled in professional degrees with

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<sup>11</sup> A reminder that all names for participants are pseudonyms.

<sup>12</sup> Due to the significant brevity of Maree's interview, her voice is absent from the findings, although I kept her in mind as I analysed the data.

a humanities focus. Beyond this institutional set of labels, the learners' experiences and knowledge vary widely.

### **Formative years**

Despite not asking specifically about childhood or family experiences, most of the students spoke in some way about where they grew up, or 'came from'. Some of the learners were born and raised in Australia, while others came to Australia as children or adult immigrants. One learner was an international student studying in Australia for a semester. For each of the individuals, both the non-Indigenous and Indigenous learners, their formative years shaped their learning in their Indigenous Studies class.

Some of the learners had grown up in regional areas with significant Aboriginal populations, which shaped the understandings that they brought to the Indigenous Studies classroom. John, Mark, and Amelia (who was born overseas) all commented on their childhood experiences in regional Australia. John *grew up in a really remote sort of south-western Australian community*, which he describes as being racially divided with *no engagement with the local community. It was an absolute racial brick wall*. Amelia shared, *I've grown up with family members, classmates, social groups that have very different opinions of Aboriginals than what I'm being presented with at uni*. Jessica had also had previous experience of Aboriginal people through her family, noting, *I've been on a few camps through my dad's old work—he worked with young Aboriginal people in the community*. Alice commented that she had grown up in a *very middle-class family*, in which she felt there were *a whole lot of issues that weren't discussed very favourably*. The two Aboriginal students both spoke of their personal connections to the content they were learning. Tania talked about her *personal understanding of the effects* of colonial policies and laws had on Indigenous Australians *because it's something that has affected my family and it's part of my family history*. Mark also spoke about personal experience, noting *our family has got a background being part of the Stolen Generation*.

Not surprisingly, for a significantly multicultural country, some of the learners were born overseas or had parents who had been born overseas. Amelia and Kelly were both born in other countries, Amelia emigrating from Britain with her family as a child, and Kelly came to Australia from South Africa as a young adult. Amelia explains:

I didn't know what an Aboriginal person was until I came to Australia, and even then my experience of the culture and the people was what I was seeing in [home town], and then it's just a lot of what you're told and there's so much bad press about Aboriginal people.

At the time of the interview, Kelly had *lived here for 18 years*, during which time she indicated being in a state of *complete ignorance* about the *history of the Aboriginal community*. Despite living in a metropolitan area with a significant Aboriginal population, Kelly reflected that *I don't see it in my daily life, it's not around me enough to create an awareness*. The kind of ignorance Kelly refers to here is the kind of structural ignorance (Tuana & Sullivan, 2007) that can arise in a society where Aboriginal peoples are called upon for ceremonial occasions such as Welcomes to Country or performance as major social events, but where colonial history is assiduously avoided. As we see later, this was a cause for considerable distress and disbelief for Kelly as she undertook her Indigenous Studies learning. Melissa's family are of Southern European origin, but she grew up in regional South Australia and spoke of having *an Aboriginal boyfriend in the past, much to my father's dismay*, hinting at a family environment where Indigenous peoples were not considered positively. Lara is an international student from a small European country with no obvious or active Indigenous population who came to Australia to study for a semester. Before coming to Australia, Lara had talked to a *friend who also came to Australia—she's a law student and she talked about Aboriginals in the law a little bit, because that's a unit she did when she was here*. Lara had also read a book written by a woman who went on walkabout, *a white woman who went on walkabout with Australian people*. The book, *Mutant Message Downunder* (Morgan, 1994), initially written as non-fiction, purported to be an account of a white women's kidnapping and subsequent journey on foot across an Australian desert, was taken up wholeheartedly by a then burgeoning New Age movement, having been lent credence by established publisher Harper Collins (Clarke, 2009). By the time a concerted campaign by the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation (Eggington, 2005) had debunked the fantasy being peddled as Aboriginal culture in the book, it had been purchased and read all over the world. Unfortunately, Lara is not the first student to have read this now highly discredited book as it has been popular, particularly with North American students (Ellis, 2004).

### **Learner's previous experience of Indigenous Studies**

Almost all the students answered in the negative when asked if they had done Indigenous Studies at school. While this is not surprising for the mature-aged students, it was more unexpected for the school leavers. Of the mature-aged students, Alice indicated that she *can't remember learning any of this [Indigenous Studies] in school*. John concurred that Indigenous Studies was *something that I wasn't taught at school*. Even when students did indicate they had done some Indigenous Studies, they reported it was perfunctory in nature, as Julie indicated:

No. I probably would say very informally. I think we had a couple of very tokenistic experiences...but nothing I think that was curriculum based.

The younger students also indicated that they had not done Indigenous Studies at school, which was surprising, given that there has been a mandatory Indigenous curriculum for some years now. Tania indicated that she did not have an opportunity to study Indigenous Studies at school, noting, *my school didn't actually offer it, unfortunately*. Similarly, Jessica, in response to my question about undertaking Indigenous Studies at school, indicated that she did not do Indigenous Studies at school noting, *we weren't offered*. She indicates that there was some marking of cultural events:

Yeah, and we obviously had NAIDOC week and that type of thing. That was only in my latter years as well, so only probably 2010 and '11 when that was actually a celebrated big school event. But there wasn't - not within our history subjects, not within our S&E I think it was called, society and environment, not mentioned.  
(Jessica)

Jessica went on to say that the year she graduated, the school did introduce an Indigenous language offering taught by a local Indigenous person, and further elaborated, *so I was really annoyed, because I was really interested in doing something like that*. Amelia remembers doing some embedded Indigenous content, *but it wasn't like a subject, but we did learn maybe one lesson in my Australian History class*. She elaborates further, suggesting:

It was terrible and it was really quickly brushed over as well. It wasn't given much thought. It was kind of just like, oh, this happened, but then this also happened and this [other topic] was far more important in the eyes of the structure of the unit and the class.

If school is where prospective university students attain their foundational skills for study at tertiary level, then it appears that these students were ill-prepared for their Indigenous Studies learning. Beyond the expected foundation literacy and perhaps research skills, for this group there was little coherent, formal curriculum to support their new learning.

### **Learner's previous experience of work**

I did not ask students about work experiences, however, some participants, both the mature-aged and the school leavers, talked about their work during the interviews. Some students talked about experiences of their work prior to beginning their degrees, particularly the mature-aged students, while others talked about the work they were doing to provide an income while they studied. John had experience of working in rural communities with Aboriginal populations in the Northern Territory. Alice had worked for more than 20 years with a welfare-based organisation that included some work with Aboriginal communities. As part of her professional development, she had undertaken some workplace training focused on *building relationships with Aboriginal communities*. Her experience of that training was quite negative, and she reported it as:

...very confronting. People would get very upset. Quite often people left in tears. People got to the point where they felt they couldn't voice their opinion anymore because it was just shut down. It was actually a really unpleasant experience for a lot of people.

During her studies, Amelia did part-time work in a neighbourhood retail business, an area where there was a large Indigenous clientele and where the organisation's bag checking policy put her directly in front of demonstrations of overt racism as indicated here:

So, I ask to check people who are white, who are black, who are of different cultural ethnicities, that sort of thing, and every time I check a white person's bag they will instantly tell me that they're not Aboriginal ... I shouldn't check their bag,

and I've actually had a white person point to an Aboriginal person in my line and say, you should check their bag too. It's been so confronting because I just like professionally try, and say, it's just based on the backpack size. I'm not indicating who is going to be a shoplifter based on the colour of their skin.

This experience is one of many that Amelia re-examines in light of her Indigenous Studies learning at university. She goes on to describe the kind of workplace socialisation that reinforces generalised negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples:

...as soon as we see an Indigenous person enter the store, we get the look from the supervisor that's like [sniffs] and the security guard follows them ...

Jessica was doing tutoring for Indigenous school students while she was studying. Two students have previous experience of working with Indigenous families in the area of child protection. Mark, an Indigenous student, notes reflectively:

I work with policies and procedures and what not. They have all these I suppose these documents around how best to culturally work with your families and things like placement principles and what not. I suppose you don't learn the true history sitting in a government office and child protection is one of the most important places to be working to make sure our kids are safe.

Julie, a non-Indigenous student, had also worked in child protection *for a very long time*, including having a *lot to do with Indigenous young people as well as non-Indigenous young people*. Julie had also had previous experience of cultural awareness training, which she experienced as *very aggressive* and overly directive. She later contrasts this negative experience of workplace training with the unexpectedly different teaching she is receiving at university.

I have explored in some depth the variety of starting points, gathered through their life experiences, for the student participants in this study. I do this to illustrate not just what the learners are separating from, but what they separate with—what accompanies them on the liminal journey. Each of these learners has a set of experiences that are likely to have created deeply ingrained tacit knowledge, some of which may not be immediately

accessible but which have the potential to evoke troublesome knowledge or be the basis for considering new course material as counter-intuitive. The learners are separating from worlds where particular truths may have been taken for granted. Alice, for example, entered her studies with some trepidation and little enthusiasm based on her previous experience of workplace cultural awareness training.

### **Changing status: beginning Indigenous Studies**

In the previous section, I examined the kinds of life experiences and knowledges that the learners in the study brought to their learning in Indigenous Studies. This previous status is worth exploring for learners as they begin the educational rite of passage into Indigenous Studies. As we will see in the later chapters examining the liminal and post-liminal phases, these life experiences are both sources of challenge in the students' learning as well as pivotal points of reflection and learning. As learners begin their Indigenous Studies learning, they are separating from the ordinary (Turner, 1979). The idea of separation evokes a move away from a previous state but also powerfully suggests a trajectory towards a new status. As, noted earlier, all the learners in this study were completing majors in disciplines other than Indigenous Studies. Those disciplinary contexts are one aspect of what learners are shifting away from.

When a learner begins to study Indigenous Studies, particularly as a stand-alone subject, they are shifting from a broadly chosen disciplinary context to a more specific and sometimes unselected part of a degree. For some learners, this will mean they will become novices again. Many will be in unfamiliar territory, separate from their everyday (Skjoldager-Neilsen & Edelman, 2014) degree programs, sometimes in physically separate spaces with unfamiliar classmates and educators. All the learners I interviewed had chosen other discipline areas as the major focus of their studies, and so they were out of their usual discipline areas when they came to the Indigenous Studies component of their degrees. Only Tania, an Indigenous learner, was planning an Indigenous Studies minor as part of her degree. Most of the interviewees were doing Indigenous Studies as a mandated part of their degrees. What the learners are separating from is the relative certainty of their disciplines, the kinds of knowledge they expect and the associated familiar ways of learning. While learners are not necessarily stripped of their original

selves in the way that traditional neophytes undergoing initiation rites experience (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969), there is a distinct sense of exposure.

## Entering new spaces

When learners first come to Indigenous Studies classrooms, they appear as a homogenous group, like ritual ‘neophytes’ (who) are “merely entities in transition, as yet without place or position” (Turner, 1969, p.364). At this beginning stage of their learning, individual differences are ironed out by their arrival in our classrooms. The status for learners that derives from year of study is blurred as neither educator nor classmates, in some instances, are aware of year level. As Alice, a mature aged learner, notes, *like I said, we've got an Aboriginal man that's in the class... we've got young people that have just left school last year. It's a real mixture.* This levelling out occurs partly because learners mostly come to the study as novices to Indigenous Studies and partly because educators do not yet ‘know’ the group beyond the assumptions rendered by experience. Non-Indigenous learners enter the apparently familiar environment of the classroom, quickly learning that appearances of similarity of surroundings in the classroom can be deceptive. For Julie, something as ordinary as the idea of behaving respectfully has been disturbed by the presence of Indigenous educators and classmates. As she explains, *it's having Indigenous people in my class, Indigenous students, and being respectful, as I'm still trying to understand what respectful is.* Julie has already been studying for a semester. She underlines the feeling of being a novice when she says, *it's that level of when you're trying to do something for the **first** (my emphasis) time, and I think coming in I carried a lot of guilt about what non-Indigenous people did.*

Learners can enter their Indigenous Studies classroom with a sense of trepidation stemming from explicit and deeply ingrained tacit prior knowledge and uncertainty about what to expect. The Indigenous Studies classroom is both a disciplinary stronghold, and by extension, a reflection of Indigenous communities and Elders, including a set of “culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships” (Turner, p.364). The educators are the agents of this particular rite, or the liminal hosts (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015) and represent the “authority of tradition” (Turner, p. 364) in this context. As Kapferer (1979) suggests, the “separation phase creates a set of ritual participants” (p.7). As learners enter this space, they attract a new label signifying their changed status. They

become, for a time at least, *Indigenous Studies students* as they enter the transitory liminal space.

## **Experiencing the cultural interface**

Although reminiscent of both Said's (1978) orientalism and Bhaba's (1994) notion of the third space, Nakata's conceptualising of the cultural interface is a uniquely Australian Indigenous theorisation of colonial and post-colonial relations, drawn specifically from his Torres Strait Islander standpoint. First and foremost, Nakata characterises the cultural interface as a site of struggle and contestation where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems meet and intertwine (Nakata, 2007), although the binary of Indigenous and Western is often what is emphasised (Dillon, 2007; Gair, 2007). Non-Indigenous students are very aware of this Indigenous and non-Indigenous separation. One student, Alice, who earlier noted having an Aboriginal person in her class, now explains how that affects the learning environment in the classroom, indicating, *We've got an Aboriginal man that's [sic] in our class, so it's very respectful*. There is a subtle implication that without the Indigenous persons presence in the classroom, the environment may be different. Although Nakata (2007) characterises the cultural interface as a place of shared communication and interaction, students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can experience this sharing as complicated, as this comment from Mark, an Indigenous student, demonstrates:

I think just the fact that sometimes I feel that it's like you're - and you can see the expressions on people's faces in the classroom - you're telling a story and you're talking about some of the history and you're talking about it from a personal level. Sometimes I feel that sometimes it's a bit intrusive on my personal life.

For non-Indigenous students, the experience can be uncomfortable as well. We heard earlier about Julie's uncertainty about how to demonstrate respect, which she elaborates on to explain here that respect includes not wanting to offend the Indigenous students in the class:

For me it's being - it's having Indigenous people in my class, Indigenous students and being respectful as I'm still trying to understand what respectful is. So, I have

no issue talking to a lecturer and pleading my ignorance ... like when I'm working with Indigenous people who are sharing their stories you don't want to say - I don't want to say the wrong things and I don't want to offend but I don't want to not - I find myself contributing anyway... (Julie).

In both cases the students are very aware of their raced positioning and for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, there is a question of impact on their learning. Educators also recognise this potential for student reticence or reluctance, as Jane explains:

...because that's the other thing with Indigenous studies, is sometimes students are too afraid to say something because they don't want to come across as racist.

That recognition leads educators, who keep the complexities of this space and the students as learners in mind, to develop ways to bridge this gap by devising curriculum which explores the notion of culture through something familiar to the learners. Mary illustrates this in the following example, where learners are asked to bring an item to class that reflects their culture, so they can share in discussion with others:

One of the techniques we actually engage in that process, is for them to bring in an item ...so they can begin to tell their narrative and story around their positioning.

### **Temporality: an additional pressure in the liminal and cultural space**

One inference associated with the metaphor of space is temporality. Learning in higher education is usually conceptualised and operationalised as linear in time. A semester begins, then unfolds week by week, and ends with exams or final assessments, via a forward trajectory. Rarely is a student able to go back once the forward momentum begins. Learning, though, may not always be linear and the time taken to learn may vary from student to student. Time is considered via the passage of hours (lectures and tutorials), weeks (semesters), and years (time taken to complete a degree). Time, however, can also be considered as how we experience time (Adams, 1995). For example, time is running out (an assignment is due today); wasting time (online entertainment); or time is money (work to support study). Learner Tania beautifully articulates how this pressure of time can be experienced by students:

You just kind of brush - you go too much, overload, you forget it, right? It becomes overwhelming. I don't know everything about Aboriginal history, but it would be nice to focus more on those events, more in detail. I mean there's so many and I know there's less weeks. It's difficult for the university to coordinate the course but it would be nice to really look at case studies in further detail.

Temporality is how 'clock' time "manifests itself in human existence" (Hoy, 2009: xiii). Space has a temporal dimension, and the notion of temporality—implied or explicit—links the metaphoric spaces, the liminal space, and the cultural interface, discussed here. In practice, these two types of time are not binaries; they occur simultaneously. Learners and teachers may be interacting in a tutorial, experiencing the passage of time on the clock, but each might also be experiencing the temporality of the cultural interface, and for students, the temporality of oscillation in the liminal space.

Temporality is also an implicit element of the cultural interface, described as a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with varying histories (Nakata, 2007). These histories and intersections are considered "not as a chronology or a linear construct, but rather a shifting infusion of past, present, and future" (Goff & Veresov, 2015). One of the expressions of the temporality in the classroom space is pressure to cover content at the expense of student learning, as one educator, Luke, explained:

So, you have to delve into the history, and you have to delve into those understandings, so that students can see why things are the way they are. Once you can cover - and the sad thing is that we can't cover it in as much detail as what I would like.

Learners also experience the pressure of time in relation to the complexity of cultural interface and curriculum, as well as time to 'keep up' in order to foster understanding, as these two students exemplify:

But yeah, I think it's difficult in that sense. Only 12 weeks to - maybe we need to do a whole year on Indigenous history. I don't know. (Melissa).

I haven't always kept up with my reading. I would, for example, still be in a reading about the first settlement and we were already - we'd already moved on to the mission part of the history and then - because you're missing those steps. (Lara).

One educator, Emma, lamented a sense that half of the class had been left behind by about week 5, but that the pressure to cover content meant that both educator and learner pressed forward with little ability to go back and collect those who fell behind. Emma recognised that *it takes students time to learn*. It is clear that both educators and learners recognise the “cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts” (Nakata, 2006, p. 272) but both feel the temporal pressure of the curriculum and the paucity of time to master those complex concepts. The temporal shifts they are describing are also reminiscent of the struggle and fluctuating trajectories of the liminal space. One of the Aunties perhaps summarises it best when she suggests *time is precious and the moments are precious*. For Indigenous Studies educators, time is surely precious.

### **Hosts of the liminal space – the educators**

Educators are the hosts of the liminal space and guides of the learner’s transition through the space (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). I interviewed seven Indigenous educators for this study. All of the educators except Luke—who was a course tutor—were skilled educators with more than five years’ experience of teaching and all but Emma were teaching a mix of students who were undertaking Indigenous Studies as elective or mandatory requirements of professional degrees. Rites of passage evoke for participants: “it organizes their emotions and experience, it questions those taken-for-granted elements of cultural life and holds them up for inspection” (Kapferer 1979, p. 6). While this quote emphasises the participant as the subject of the rite, there is an implicit reference to the organisers of the rite. Yet, as Cara suggests, educators *provide really carefully constructed spaces for (students) to practise what they’re learning and might be able to actually understand (student) behaviours a lot better*.

As guides of the liminal journey, the educators work to create the learning environment by setting the tone of the space and by deploying a combination of their Indigenous

knowledges, and their disciplinary expertise along with their educative skills. As Luke (educator) suggests the early weeks of a teaching session are *crucial from my perspective in terms of setting an example for the way that you discuss issues*. In addition, though, as Jennifer (educator) indicates, there is a sense of anticipation regarding the potent potential of a new group of learners:

I think it's exciting to make a classroom environment for Indigenous studies challenging but diverse in terms of acknowledging that the students have different lived experiences and knowledges and that they're so extreme like from one end of the scale to the next.

The Indigenous Studies *communitas* is a “place of humanity” where “relations are generative” (Turner, 1969, p. 360). A critical element of the threshold concepts framework in the notion that learners develop the capacity not just to understand their discipline but also to begin to think like discipline experts (Land et al., 2005). Educator practice in the field of Indigenous Studies models some elements of thinking like an Indigenous Studies discipline expert, which Mary demonstrates as she aims to create learning environments where there is respect, enabling engagement in ideas without offence, and noting, *one of my strategies is actually to discuss those polarised perspectives without referring to the individuals*. So, instead of pointing out that a particular student thinks that Indigenous people get special treatment, Mary would use the idea as a discussion point.

This humane approach is echoed by Luke (educator) who stresses the futility of censuring learners for their existing thinking:

There's always someone there to help but you've got to not blame students either because what they may or may not have learnt outside of your classroom, they're bringing all that into the classroom. You can't apportion blame or be angry about that, you've just got to work with what you're confronted with in the class.

This ethos of compassion can extend to common classroom practises like public speaking as Wendy (educator) indicates:

...if I've given (students) a task I ask for someone to speak and then I'll choose somebody. If it's somebody I know who hasn't often engaged in conversations - and I do get people get nervous and don't like public speaking, that's why it's important to have those small groups. So, it's not you speaking in front of 27 people, you can speak in front of four.

The emphasis on humanity and respect is a critical part of the philosophy of the Indigenous Studies communitas of this group of educators which seems to align with the practice of discussion and active student engagement, important elements of the process of assisting learners through the process of transition through the liminal space. In various ways, educators Cara, Luke, Mary and Jane indicate the value of discussion for student learning. Cara, for example, suggests students *learn by doing and being involved* and that this active involvement helps students *pay more attention*. Mary is more specific about discussion indicating, *we really get them to interact and through group discussion bring in their questions*. Jane spends considerable time writing feedback on student assessment task, particularly the first one and aims to *give (students) time to talk about the essays in class, so that they can talk about it to one another*.

Discussion can be helpful for students in sorting through their ideas, but it requires active listening on the part of the educator in:

...cultivating a third ear that listens not for what a student knows (discrete packages of knowledge) but for the terms that shape a student's knowledge, her not knowing, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances. (Ellsworth, 1997 p.71)

### **Humility and humiliation in the liminal space**

Rites of passage are necessarily arduous. They mark the entry to significant new phases of life, or new roles, with elevated levels of status and responsibility. As Turner (1969) indicates, in his theorisation of rites of passage:

The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted, represent partly a destruction of their previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. (p. 364)

It is unlikely that educators of Indigenous Studies will subject students to physiological humiliation, yet there is some resonance with the common notion that students must understand their white privilege. This is an aspect of liminality not usually noted in the threshold concept literature, but which has particular relevance for Indigenous Studies. There is a degree of humility required and indeed, as will be seen in the next chapter, students experience this to greater or lesser extents. Similarly, the idea of regulating novices during the liminal passage (Turner, 1969) so that they ultimately take their new responsibilities seriously is also familiar. We see the effects of this in the final findings chapter on transformation, which deals with the third phase of the rite of passage. In the extended passage below, Cara (educator) describes a class activity designed to provide students with some insight into the exercise of colonial power, which she uses specifically to unsettle her neophyte learners to elucidate ideas like power, privilege, and authority. While the activity is not brutal, it does involve the physical and psychological engagement of students.

There are three parts to the activity, including the initial unsettling aspect of the activity, the second part of the activity seeks to dispossess students of something they value; and then, critically, a vigorous debrief following the activity. Cara describes the beginning of the activity:

I start getting the students to do things. ...I might make some sit in certain places. I turn a chair upside down and tell a student to sit on and then won't let them move it around. I make late arrivals come down the front and sit at the front of the class behind me.

At this point, the students are unsettled and wondering about what is happening. It is probably not the kind of activity students have encountered before, during their studies. Yet, despite this uncertainty, the students go along with the directions they are given.

Passive or humble behaviour is common as people begin rites of passage and enter liminal spaces as participants ‘obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint’ (Turner 1969, p. 359). The next phase of the activity is the dispossession, as Cara describes:

... Then I’m like okay now I want you to pick up the things that are valuable to you. I make it really clear; valuable. It’s up to you decide what that is. But leave all the things that aren’t important. They pick up the things and then they’re all standing up around the classroom.

Interestingly, the students in this class, for the most part, heed the directions they are given by choosing something of value but leaving most of their belongings behind, with very few taking all of their items. Cara notes that *eventually someone might exercise some of their own power and authority, but mostly people won’t*. In the post-activity discussion, Cara talks about how authority can lead to coercive use of power, noting how quickly the learner group *respected me because I had an air of authority*. The students are encouraged to think about what made them choose their valued item and which items to leave. It is difficult for students today to understand the impact of colonisation on Indigenous Australians and even more complex to comprehend the ongoing effects of these events on Indigenous peoples. This carefully constructed activity does not recreate colonisation or even ask students to imagine the consequences; it allows students to experience, in a very minor way, that provokes deep reflection, some of the colonial elements of power, authority, and dispossession. Importantly, as Cara notes, *you can see their pennies are dropping in that they didn’t fight*. It is clear from this passage that the students have entered a new kind of learning space.

Students notice both the difference but also some sense of cohesion as they come together as a group. Julie (a learner not from Cara’s class) is explicit about the difference in approach of Indigenous Studies educators as they guide students, explaining that, *it’s just a very different approach to what I’ve experienced through my other three topics that I’ve done as a first-time uni goer*. She goes on to clarify further how that sense of community is created:

I just wanted to allude to the fact that every other course that I've done has not had that spiritual, cultural connectedness that taps into the arts and that ability to tap into your own creativity and arts. It's not really an arts focus it's more about your heart, like it helps your heart and your knowing (Julie).

Julie is clear here about the connection between the difference in Indigenous Studies from the teaching and experience in her usual major, but she also links that intentionally to learning in this area. Similarly, learner Tania explores the connection between the educator as guide and her learning, stating, *when you have a passionate tutor or a lecturer, that is what helps me and drives—pushes me to study well.*

### **Communitas: Building learning communities**

Meyer and Land (2005) were convinced that the notion of liminality had particular relevance for transformative processes for disciplinary learners. The threshold concepts framework also emphasises the importance of the roles of both learners and educators in their conceptions (Cousin, 2006). The educator, though, is largely a representative of and for the discipline because threshold concepts are so inherently intertwined with knowledge (and knowing) of a specific field of study. This is likely why threshold concepts have withstood criticism. The focus of the transformation is on the learner's often irreversible new understanding of specific disciplinary concepts, leading to discipline mastery. The threshold concepts themselves are important to identify, related as they are to student challenge in their eventual mastery. However, the transformative process and the medium in which the rite of passage or learning transition occurs bear further examination (Kapferer, 1979).

Exploring the transformative process requires closer examination of the learning or liminal environment and the elements of the ritual. In the next two chapters, I will discuss safety in the classroom in relation to learners' liminal experiences (chapter 5) and educator aspirations for learners in relation to transformative learning outcomes (chapter 6). Here I want to examine in more detail the liminal space that learners are entering. I characterise this space using Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas*, which he uses rather than the term *community*, to distinguish the liminal community from the usual socio-geographical communities. In this sense, *communitas* can be understood as a transient

arrangement, associated with a rite of passage, in which a variety of different people “communicate and bond with one another without considering one’s social standing as a divide” (McGinnis et al., 2008, p. 76). John’s experience of a learner in a large multidisciplinary Indigenous Studies class and tutorial provides a perspective on this class bond, *you don't know anybody and so there's a high degree, in my view, of emotional integrity that has been experienced and offered by people in the tute group. So that's pretty special.* Alice, who earlier spoke about respect in the classroom, has a similar experience, remarking that *everyone's very open to asking questions. You learn when other people ask questions, all that stuff, so that's quite a supportive group, I find.* Indigenous Studies classrooms are commonly multidisciplinary, and - particularly in introductory subjects - unbound by student year level. As we can see from the introduction of the students earlier, learners from a range of backgrounds coalesce into an Indigenous Studies learning communitas.

### **Educator qualities which foster communitas**

Students describe a cluster of educator qualities that are an overlapping set of largely personal traits. These qualities of being receptive and generous suggest an attuned, student-centred style of teaching. What this approach suggests is that educators are well able to mask the sometimes-draining nature of teaching discussed above. Unsurprisingly, students’ focus here is on the classroom safety or their own emotional support, as this is the area that students consistently report when asked about what was challenging for them in Indigenous Studies.

Both Alice and Amelia, students from two different cohorts, noted the openness of their educators. For Amelia, this was particularly important as she struggled with her emotions and understanding how she might avoid the paralysis of her blend of guilt and subsequent shifting frames of reference as she experienced liminality.

Then the tutor's really very approachable, and so are all the lecturers. I think it's a good overall package (Alice)

Yeah, so that's definitely been a way for me to kind of alleviate my difficulties. I've spoken to [educator] about it as well. We just had a good chat about it and that really helped. I think speaking about it definitely really helped (Amelia).

In this short passage, Amelia uses the forceful qualifiers *definitely*, *really* and *good* to emphasise the essential nature of support for the emotive aspects of her learning. Learners understand this openness as supportive, but what they are perhaps less aware of is that educators use those opportunities as 'teaching moments' and consciously promote and seize upon the discursive and generative possibilities in such spontaneous instances.

Mark experienced his educator's generosity in two ways. First, the educator's willingness to share her stories helped to build his own confidence. Earlier Mark noted he had serious concerns about sharing his existing knowledge and lived experience.

They include their stories as well which is good. ...reading her history, I was in tears reading it. I thought well here's a lady up doing the same sort of stuff and that makes me comfortable about talking about my history (Mark, student).

While this kind of contemplation may be a burden for Indigenous students, conversely, Indigenous students like Mark can experience another dimension of educator generosity, which might be described as caring:

You'll come in and the course coordinator, [educator name], she'll ask you how are you going in your studies? Invite you into the room. The room is open, you'll walk in, and you want to ask a question. Is there anything you want to talk about?

While this initially seems like a general inquiry and even perhaps politeness, Mark's not untypical response suggests a more intentional action on the educator's part. He replies by returning to the topic of his studies, which is a likely response, given the student-teacher relationship:

I'll say that the reflection on [field visit site] has got a real lot meaning - it's a lot of personal meaning to me. So, I can't complete that in the word amount - like you've got 700 words. They're comfortable with that. You're quite welcome to do that. Yeah, it's a really culturally safe environment.

This interaction gives the educator an opportunity to demonstrate a level of individual focus, caring, and flexibility that the student, a mature-aged undergraduate who has had a prior negative experience of tertiary study, experiences as a culturally safe environment conducive to his learning.

Another student appreciates her educators' creativity in using a contemporary Hollywood movie to highlight difficult issues of race and power. Jessica is experiencing her learning as fraught enough to want to absent herself, explaining; *yeah, really hard and it was like I wanted to not be there sometimes*. However, she is also grateful to the educator for presenting the content in a way that doesn't exempt her from the work of 'unpacking' but does relieve her of immobilising discomfort, as she notes:

But I think the way as well [educator] presented those issues was also really commendable. We watched Avatar; Avatar is quite easy to watch in terms of something to do at university, but then unpacking it... (Jessica, student)

Julie earlier noted her surprise at not being more emotional in response to class content and attributed that to the quality and care of the delivery. Here, she makes the very clear connection between the non-judgemental attitudes of the educators and her feeling of safety to learn, as follows:

There's a graciousness about the people and given the content is quite horrific and exposes non-Indigenous people to a horrific part of our past I think it's done so carefully and in a way that acknowledges what happened but doesn't place blame and that makes me as a non-Indigenous person very comfortable about exploring a history that I wasn't too familiar with or knew very little (Julie)

While there is an underlying hint of othering in the language Julie uses, her description of her educators as gracious is apt, but combined with 'the people' suggests an essentialising that is not unexpected but is likely to reflect that Julie is in the early stages of her Indigenous Studies learning. Although this description of educators as gracious sounds trite, it very likely belies the skill and resoluteness that these discipline experts bring to their teaching. As Mary says:

Sometimes it's just listening to students. I have had students come in crying into my office because they're just so distressed that they didn't know. So, I just sit with them and say, you acknowledge your emotions but now there's a whole lot of learning that you can undertake to actually bring that knowledge together and really just keep connecting with them (Mary).

## **The influence of Elders in Indigenous Studies classrooms**

I am aware from my work in the sector that a number of Australian universities have Elder-in-Residence programs. Some of those Elders, and other community members, are invited to speak to students in a guest or visiting lecturer capacity. In some cases, non-Indigenous educators collaborate with Indigenous Elders (Harrison, Burke & Clarke, 2020) on particular topic areas, but rarely would those Elders oversee the curriculum. Discipline-specific ways of thinking and practising are essential elements of the threshold concepts framework (Knight & Wilkinson, 2020; Meyer & Land, 2003), which might include the abundant scope of subject matter as well as the “forms of discourse, values or ways of acting which are regarded as central to graduate-level mastery of a discipline or subject area” (McCune & Hounsell, 2005, p. 257). Barradell & Peseta (2013) argue that this link between thinking and acting requires discourse beyond educators and students to include professions and other stakeholders. This small group of Elders, although initially unsure of what they might contribute, ultimately warmed to the subject of what Indigenous Studies learners should learn at university, contributing thoughts about subject matter, behavioural expectations, and even approaches to teaching.

The key point made by the Elders was the importance of ensuring that students are told the truth. This group of Elders were clear that there is an Indigenous Australian truth and a national truth and that in between there are gaps and silences that they themselves have experienced. As Uncle Joe explains, *so I think the kids have got to learn the **Aboriginal history** (my emphasis) and then he suggests further, you've got to give them one scenario and give them the other scenario, **the truth** (my emphasis), you know what I mean?*

Uncle Max elaborates using a now common symbol, Captain Cook's charting of the East Coast of what we now call Australia, for the beginning of colonisation:

I think the main thing out of that is to give them Cook's thing and then give them the Aboriginal side of so that it rules out all what we've sort of been taught. Because when I went to school, we were taught that Captain Cook ruled the place and stuff like that.

This is truth-telling as a remedy for the partially told truths of the colonial period. Aunty Olive agrees wholeheartedly, when she responds with [tell them] *the truth, everything. the beginning, the truth, all about it. We never got told. We were told Captain Cook arrived, bang, that was it, nothing.* Uncle Jack seems to sum matters up with his succinct but telling response: it's *all bullshit.*

Uncle Joe alludes to truths that fill in gaps or overlay silences with his impassioned response:

You will still learn history but get out there and tell the kids the truth of what happened to Aboriginal people in Australia. Even down here at [local area], they went down there to wait for the longboats to come there; they came over the mountain and massacred them, all down there. ...let's start telling the kids the truth of what happened ...

In a group of Aboriginal people, it is not necessary to explain that the *they* Uncle speaks of are the British colonisers. There is general assent that telling these truths is vital even if it means talking about massacres, rape, and ill-treatment, as this brief exchange illustrates:

Aunty Jan: Don't gloss over anything.

Uncle Alec: Straight down the line.

Aunty Mina: Yep, as it is. Even though it might be horrible.

Despite a strong sense of camaraderie and joviality in the group, they are clear that university learners should not be shielded from harsh truths. Their determination to expose this exacting history is a better outcome for the future rather than an end point.

It is the spirit in which they discuss these atrocious histories that is instructive. Aunty Win could see the possibilities for graduates in creating better outcomes for the next generations:

a lot of those students, when they graduate, are going to have the potential to make change. The change might start moving on once they hit the workforce and they're influencing...

One of the other Aunts agreed that better education would help students *to have a better understanding so that we can have better results*. The patience and determination evident in the approach of this group of Elders is overt. Uncle Jack explains, sharing his knowledge of something very practical but also reinforcing the importance of teaching and taking time:

Yeah, but you don't rush through - see a nice big puddle of water there. You don't rush and say, I'm thirsty, I'm going to drink it, I'm going to drink it. You don't do that. You don't do that at all. You get the water line; you measure from the water line. About half a metre down, let the water soak through the wall of the dam there, of the waterhole, let it soak through and then have a sip. I don't mean gallons of it, a cupful will do to keep you going to go somewhere else, or even take a cupful with you. That's how you - they've got to be taught.

Aunty Jan reinforces the role of Elders as Knowledge holders with connections to both Country and history, when she says:

Will you take your shoes off and put your feet on the earth itself? Get to know us, get to know what we've been through, where we came from. Our stories are here. Our education is here off this land, and we know every little thing that's here upon the sand.

Her words here, though, place the onus on the learner when she (hypothetically) asks, *will you take your shoes off?* She is mounting the challenge which learners can choose to take, emphasising the agency of the learner, which reverberates in the spirit of the educators

who participated in this study. Her next words reflect the humility that new learners might need as they navigate through the liminal space:

We've got the knowledge; we've got the know-how and we can give it to everyone that needs it. But it also comes with giving and a little bit of respect and acknowledgment and acceptance. Don't try and knock us and judge us just because of this colour.

In this chapter I have explored the first phase of the rite of passage in Indigenous Studies, characterising the pre-liminal period where learners begin their learning journey separating from their home disciplines and entering the cultural interface and liminal space of their new learning experience. The next part of the passage is the liminal phase, characterised most commonly as a period of struggle and ambiguity, but also of opportunity to learn. This time of transition can be challenging and rewarding for both educators and learners.

## Chapter 5 The Challenges of Liminality

*...if it's not making you feel something ..., I don't think it's worth doing* (Jessica, student).

Liminality, and its associated troublesomeness, are two key features of the threshold concepts framework. Together they signal the often-uncomfortable beginning of a transformative learning experience for students, but which ultimately results in the acquisition of new knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005). Discomfort accompanying learning is a widely acknowledged aspect of transformative learning and threshold concepts. The commonly invoked metaphors of journey and space illustrate a transitory period of (real) time in which students engage and grapple with complex disciplinary concepts (Cousin, 2006; Fouberg, 2012). Drawing on anthropological notions of rituals, and rites of passage (Meyer & Land, 2005) suggest that while liminal states are ultimately transformative, the trajectory to this change can be challenging and convoluted. The period can be characterised by doubt, confusion and ambiguity (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015) which eventually lead to altered understanding and identity (Meyer & Land, 2005). In the Australian Indigenous Studies context, student discomfort is recognised (Sjoberg & McDermott, 2016), but the association or relationship to learning and subsequent frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991) is less examined. Meyer and Land's (2003; 2005) conception of threshold concepts that act as portals to further learning and fresh understanding is particularly relevant. In this phase students have entered the new space and are beginning to learn to think like Indigenous Studies scholars. Deeper understanding of their learning trajectories may add greater clarity to the nexus between the discomfort of this learning and subsequent transformation. Explicating liminality in Indigenous Studies could also suggest fresh understandings of student behaviours such as resistance, leading to reconceptualising the racism we expect to (and do) see in the classroom, and to rethinking teaching practice.

This chapter has two broad sections. The first deals with the experience of liminality, both the familiar conceptions associated with Meyer and Land's original framework and those experiences more particular to Indigenous Studies. This section includes a set of challenges related to the student characteristics, such as being mature aged or an international student. These challenges did not relate to knowledge and yet seemed to interfere with student's learning. As well, this section includes a perplexing set of findings

which emerged in response to an interview question about challenges to learning in Indigenous Studies. While students did identify a range of topics which caused them to struggle, I noticed a much more puzzling issue. At this juncture I am calling this the phenomenon of ‘not knowing’. This phenomenon seems to be characterised by the liminality which typifies a threshold concept, without being related to a specific knowledge concept. It is, however, associated with particularly strong emotions and may be related to tacit knowledge. The second section includes findings in relation to what teachers do to promote threshold crossing and to ameliorate the effects of liminality, particularly the idea of safe classrooms and storytelling, and how that is received by learners.

### **The Learner Experience of Liminality**

Struggle is a feature of liminality; struggle to comprehend, to understand or grasp a concept. The liminal space is an “unstable space” (Cousin, 2010, p.3) in which learners may encounter troublesome or counter-intuitive knowledge (Perkins, 2008) as they develop broad disciplinary understanding. Significantly, this is a period when learners are attempting to master the concept rather than remaining unaware or choosing to reject the concept (Morgan, 2012). The struggle for students in this space is likely to be both cognitive and affective resulting in identity shifts (Clouder, 2005; Cousin, 2006; Parker, 2013).

### **Familiar Patterns of Liminality**

Liminality can mean that students are required to let go of their previous, sometimes more comfortable, understandings which can prove unsettling (Land et al., 2005). This letting go can take time, particularly in a country where Indigenous-associated racism and prejudice is not uncommon (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016) and negative discussions of Indigenous matters in the public domain are common. One student, Amelia, who we learned earlier had grown up in an area with a significant Aboriginal population, reflected on the divergence of her own ideas about Indigenous matters as she undertook Indigenous Studies learning indicating that:

... I've grown up with family members, classmates, social groups that have very different opinions of Aboriginals than what I'm being presented with at uni and

I'm stuck in this place that for a very long time of my childhood and teenage years  
I saw...

Amelia's comment reveals a classic threshold concept idea, the notion of the 'stuck place' (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998; Meyer & Land, 2005). It is almost possible to hear the tectonic plates of her socialised episteme groaning under the threat of her new knowledge; the challenge to her existing frames of reference palpable (Mezirow, 2003). Amelia goes on to relate this difficulty to her subject learning:

Yeah, it's really - it's been really hard, especially in the assignments that we've had for this unit, to try and twist and change my mindset and be able to reflect on my new knowledge because it doesn't sit with my old and, yeah, it's really conflicting.

Initially she manages this in a way which educators in Indigenous Studies have come to recognise as resistance (Gair, 2013; Nicoll, 2000). While it may be potentially maladaptive, Amelia's response suggests that the pacing of curriculum, particularly initially, may be important:

Yeah, so I didn't take on board what we were learning. I didn't want to either because it was challenging and it made me rethink my values, and that's something that people don't like to be contested with.

The new knowledge that Amelia is struggling with is deeply counter-intuitive from what she has internalised reflecting the kind of ignorance that can develop in families and peer groups (Tuana & Sullivan, 2007) and seems to have developed into deeply ingrained, tacit knowledge that is taken for granted (Perkins, 1999) and has until this point not required examination. John has a different issue but no less counter-intuitive:

okay archaeology whilst it was under the banner of anthropology has got a pretty bad rap and we're seeing that here and what we're seeing - we're seeing this binary - to use [teacher's] sort of analogy this morning - there's this binary sort of concept in here - and I said this to [tutor] here that Tindale<sup>13</sup> is a classic where he's kind of

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<sup>13</sup> Tindale is the name of an Australian anthropologist.

almost the villain here in this topic. In archaeology he's held up in reasonably good regard (John, student).

John may be struggling here with the “praxis of not being so sure” (Lather, 1998, p. 488) and a challenge to previously understood certainties. The learner has had his discipline hero presented in a quite different way and is now trying to reconcile that, which is counterintuitive, given the previous learning.

Critically in the liminal space there is a sense of a trajectory through a space which learners are actively navigating but not always smoothly as they “oscillate between old and [the] emergent” (Cousin, 2006, p 4). Students are not always able to articulate this sense of vacillation, but the sense of struggle is captured by Alice:

...I think there's sometimes an understanding of something, and then I don't, and then I'm just sometimes stuck on the - there's so many dates and significant times when things happened. It's just trying to get in my head when it all happened..., because it's very complex obviously, incredibly complex.

Students may not always be aware of this oscillation, but educators often recognise the ways in which students might progress and then regress, as one educator, Cara, noted below:

... you do start to see a language changing. You start to see that the sources that they used do emerge a little a bit. I think there's a lot of work that can be done there. Because of course once they start reading about their topics it's often written by non-Aboriginal or non-sensitive Aboriginal people.... The language shifts back to whatever they're reading again. It's quite a weird development all the time, reworking with them.

The experience of liminality may be different for international students, many of whom take Indigenous Studies as a way of gaining a unique Australian cultural experience. As Lara notes:

I feel like if I would have kept up with everything that would have maybe given me more of that conceptual framework, because now I do have the facts and I do

have a general idea of the timeline, well, I think most - better than a lot of other students that didn't do the unit. In the end the framework might not have been as developed as they wanted us to - also because I don't have a history background, so I'm not used to looking at facts in that way.

Lara is clearly out of her disciplinary comfort zone and recognises early in the semester that her lack of general Australian knowledge is problematic as she explains further:

I also feel sometimes they [educator] assume that students have knowledge, for example, the Freedom Rides<sup>14</sup>. We've never had a lecturer saying this was what happened in the Freedom Rides. I know that now because I did the readings for a paper that I'm writing. Also, because I don't have a background in Australian history it's hard sometimes to follow what they're getting at if you don't know. They would say, yeah, because a few years ago you know this and this and this happened, and I'm like, I don't know. How would I know?

While this may be a different kind of liminality it highlights a contradiction that I will examine further below. Lara felt her difficulties stemmed from both a different disciplinary background (psychology) and her lack of Australian background. However, the domestic students, occasionally including the Indigenous students, also professed a lack of knowing about Indigenous Australia. Lara's experience may help to illuminate the role of tacit knowledge, further explored below.

### **Non-Cognitive Challenges for Individual Learners**

Surprisingly, there were a cluster of issues that students raised as challenging that did not relate to knowledge, yet seemed to interfere with or impede students' learning. This group of issues illuminates a complex range of issues educators of Australian Indigenous Studies might reasonably expect to encounter. As noted in the earlier chapters, Indigenous Studies classrooms are cultural interfaces in which a diverse range of students will engage.

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<sup>14</sup> The Freedom Rides of the 1960's were part of a US and global civil rights movement to address racial inequality. Inspired by the US civil rights movement (Maynard, 2003), in 1965 a group of Australian students from the University of Sydney drove a Freedom Ride bus to Walgett in Western NSW to protest racial segregation and shocking living conditions for Aboriginal people of the local area (Curthoys, 2011).

Underlining the notion of the classroom as a cultural interface, the divergent issues raised here relate to identity. Some of these issues, such as being a mature aged learner, were related to the students themselves and other issues, such as having non-Indigenous educators were related to the classroom experience. Each in its own way contributes to the learner's struggles in the liminal space.

### **Being an Indigenous Learner**

Two of the participating learners, from different cohorts, identified as Aboriginal. One learner, Tania was a recent school leaver and the other, Mark, was mature-aged. Mark felt a dual challenge in being the only Indigenous student in his tutorial group, and also being mature-aged. For this student, the first issue was related to how much he should share of his own experience, recognising the risks inherent in this, although he often found himself doing just that. This led Mark to feel that he was actively 'teaching' classmates, particularly when group work or class discussion was being undertaken. He felt that his Indigeneity, as well as being older than many of his cohort, contributed to this challenge.

I thought here I am sitting in this class and I'm thinking is it my role to educate her and say there's parts of an Act—the *Anti-Discrimination Act* that basically allow provision for that type of service. I'll give you an example—Aboriginal medical services. Aboriginal people seem too frightened or too scared to go [to health services] because of their history, they've experienced racism, they don't want to go to a local medical service. They might have something major going on in their health life and they still need that addressed. So, there's these places established for that particular reason. I didn't say that that day, I just let [tutor]...

Indigenous learners should not have to teach their classmates. Mark goes on to add another layer of complexity to his predicament, worrying about how he might be perceived by his mostly younger cohort.

I think I also struggle with being a mature age student coming into class. I'm sitting there with predominantly younger, non-Indigenous students. So, sitting there and sometimes I feel like here I go again I'm telling the same story that I've told so many times. I find it really hard, and I know the facts are it wasn't taught in schools and it's probably still not in the curriculum, Indigenous studies, but I'm

just finding difficulty in comprehending that lack of understanding by non-Indigenous students.

As Mark notes, his concern is not just about being a mature-aged learner. There is a combined dilemma here of being mature-aged, and Indigenous. This might just be a reality of student life except that Mark stresses that he finds this difficult, clearly linking it to a sense of incredulity that his classmates are not better informed (a contradiction in itself, given that his classmates are in class to learn). Nevertheless, this was a response to a question about what he finds challenging.

Tania questioned the role of non-Indigenous educators. For this learner it was challenging to hear a non-Indigenous educator so confidently recounting what the student felt was Indigenous knowledge and stories:

But I think sometimes it affects my attention. Like if I go to class, I'm like here we go again. This is just another repetition of a non-Indigenous lecturer up there. Mind you, some of the points they say are very accurate. But the points that they're actually speaking about, are actually from Aboriginal leaders and people themselves. So, you know, it's not directly from them [the educator]. It's something they've learnt from Aboriginal people. So, they're actually being paid to say what Aboriginal people have been saying for so long and finally it's like now you're finally saying it.

While Tania's response might not immediately seem like liminality, there is clearly a struggle inside the classroom as she explicitly attributes difficulty paying attention to having non-Indigenous educators. In some respects, this is counter-intuitive for her to be hearing about Indigenous peoples from those she considers not to be the custodians of those stories. Outside of the classroom Tania reveals similar challenges:

But in saying that, yeah, I think it does probably affect my attitude. I want to complete the readings. I don't do the readings because as an Aboriginal person, I'm like well, a lot of the readings are from non-Indigenous academics. So, I mean I probably need to change that attitude, but I don't particularly participate in the readings because a lot of them are from non-

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Indigenous academics. I don't think they have a valid point unless they provide an Aboriginal perspective in their readings.

It might be tempting to consider Tania's comments as the slightly naïve comments of a recent school leaver who is yet to fully understand the nature of disciplinary scholarship. Yet, what Tania does is strip bare an assumption regarding whose voices should contribute to or even create, the scholarly record, that many of her non-Indigenous classmates will not even have registered. This is an area for further exploration.

### **Being a Non-Indigenous Student**

I draw on Julie's experience as an exemplar here. For non-Indigenous learner Julie, in a different student cohort, the liminal challenge was related to fear of offending Indigenous classmates. While tutorials can potentially be sites of generative, dialogic learning opportunity, Julie felt constrained by the prospect of giving offense to Indigenous classmates, though interestingly, she noted being less concerned about risk of offending the (Indigenous) educator. The potential to insult an Indigenous educator is a point I will return to, however at this stage it is worth noting that Julie recognised the possibility of causing offence. Julie was reflective enough as this point in our conversation to explicitly distinguish between course content, which was less challenging for her, and the classroom learning environment.

... like I just think that I have a couple of Indigenous people in my class and I have to be very respectful to their experiences. So, I may have held back on some ideas that I might have had to be respectful. It's not really about the content it's more about the environment.

There is a quite complex, dynamic interplay here between a student's desire to be respectful and an active 'holding back' of oneself to achieve that end, which is unlikely to be evident to an educator managing a classroom of learners. Indeed, it is possible that Julie appeared disengaged and disinterested as she grappled with her own (pre-existing) sense of what it is to be respectful to Indigenous people and her internal decision-making processes about what she should or could share of her own ideas. Julie goes on to explain another source of challenge for her:

Yes, it is something that I'm conscious of. Even with this group presentation, like I go who is going to do the Welcome [to Country]? Should we - like allowing the Aboriginal person in our group to step up and do that or should we - it's that [unclear] thing. Do I offer that? What do we talk about? With that particular person I just say I'm not really sure what's correct about this but what would you like to do?

## **Being An International Learner**

As noted earlier in this chapter, Lara, an international student, indicated that she felt the absence of any knowledge about Australian history, but she elaborated further, noting, in addition, that she felt her lack of understanding global historical movements was also something of an impediment:

I feel in the lectures they link a lot of different things together, also things that happened outside of Australia. I feel like you really need to have a very comprehensive view of the history of the world, basically, to be able to follow that framework as intensely as they want you to. Sometimes also in the lectures it's hard to follow what they are getting at, because it's like you have to be able to understand what happens in France, what happens in Europe, other parts of the world, to be able to understand what happens in Australia.

## **The Phenomenon of Not Knowing**

While students did identify a range of topics which caused them to struggle (as noted above), I noticed a much more perplexing issue. At this juncture I am calling this the phenomenon of 'not knowing'. This phenomenon seems to be characterised by the liminality which typifies a threshold concept, without being related to a specific knowledge concept. This idea of 'not knowing' has similarities with what Hawkins and Edwards (2015) call "symbolic liminal monsters" (p. 25) which their leadership education students experienced in the form of anxiety and doubt. Critically they argue that "doubt is a central thread through the processes of *learning about* and *doing* [author emphasis] leadership" (2015, p. 27), recognising that students express doubt when learning about leadership but also that doubt is an important aspect of being a leader.

The silhouettes of this phenomena of not knowing have been identified in a number of guises that I have discussed earlier in this thesis. Stanner's (1979) *Great Australian Silence* is perhaps an aspect of this concept, as are the various type of ignorances that I have already noted and which resonate in questions about why we weren't told (Reynolds, 2000). There are similar echoes in Watego's (2021) more recent book, *Another Day in the Colony*, whose title alone suggests a taken for grantedness of the mundanity of things that are unknown to non-Indigenous people, while also cataloguing the ongoing damage of the embers of colonisation. What is less examined is the way this phenomenon of not knowing might be important for learning, or more specifically how an awareness of the phenomenon might be pedagogically practical. The idea of 'not knowing' however is associated with particularly strong emotions which may be related to tacit knowledge.

## Unknowing

The idea of unknowing is elusive and slippery. While coding my data, I noticed learners particularly talking about how little they knew before they began Indigenous Studies. My initial thoughts were that it was somewhat unusual for learners to be focused on what they did not know. Surely, when a learner enrolls in a subject it is to learn more about the topic. This would be a reasonable expectation even where the subject is mandated, and where students are perhaps less motivated to learn, rather than an elective choice. This student perspective struck me as unusual but became further intriguing as I noticed that educators were saying something similar. It made me wonder about what is it that learners and educators believe is not known; why learners would expect something to be known prior to formal study; and what should be known. I first noticed the idea in the comments of students from one of the locations with a significant, visible Aboriginal population. I wondered then if this idea might be related to students' lived experiences, an idea which led to starting points and for development of the more elaborate student stories. Was there a type of student—young or mature for example—for whom this topic was raised? What factors might contribute to, or effect it? These questions led me to a deeper analysis of the data.

In the first instance this was not something I coded for specifically in my NVIVO analysis. I had initially coded this data at the node called liminality, however, as the idea recurred, I recoded the data into a new node called *knowing*. I systematically re-analysed the student

transcripts particularly looking for commentary related to knowing. I also used the query function in NVIVO to run an analysis looking for words that might be related to ‘knowing’—distress, concern, guilt, not knowing, and all threshold concept nodes. I vacillated between characterising this as an issue of knowing or not-knowing. The participant comments seemed to suggest both and at the same time neither quite described what I was seeing in the data. In some sense this became a counter-intuitive problem of my own—why would students or educators expect to ‘know’ before study begins? The learner expectation was an indication of something that was not yet clear to me. I have come to see the phenomenon not as one or the other, but as part of a process of liminality where learners are experiencing the oscillation and uncertainty that the threshold concepts framework explains.

Learners talk about not knowing, but in ways that hint at a kind of knowing, as Alice indicates:

I think the challenging thing is, for me personally, is just probably the lack of knowledge that I have around all of this. It's not that there is some guilt involved in that, but it's - how have we got to this point where - how have I got to this point where I know so little? For me, I'm just learning so much. It's been - and I'm still - so much to learn, but yeah. I think the hardest thing is just acknowledging how little I know.

Here Melissa explains the unspoken nature of (Indigenous) history, despite living in a location with a significant Indigenous population with a proud cultural heritage and replete with colonial overlay:

I enjoy factual analysis and piecing together what's happened, and especially because there's so much not spoken about the history, there's been events that I've just not known about.

John attributes his unknowing to not being taught any Indigenous Studies at school, which is not an uncommon experience for mature-age learners in Australia:

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I think the interesting thing with that is that it's all pretty new. So - and as I indicated on the short answer stuff, it's something that I wasn't taught at school.

He goes on to add:

But what did change is the fact that - it was the whole, I was never told this. That's the new bit. Even though it's always there in the periphery (John, learner).

This passage gives a sense of the flux of this issue and perhaps the fragmentary nature of what is known, tacitly or otherwise; what is not known; and introduces the idea of knowledge withheld that was not told and perhaps should have been. John noting that the things he was not told were in the periphery suggests an awareness of something Indigenous and a kind of knowing that was unnecessary or just out of reach. Kelly is more explicit about the reasons for not knowing when she suggests an overt hiding of Indigenous matters:

I think the most challenging ideas for me, because I've lived here for 18 years, so the most challenging for me has been the fact that it's been packed away so well, that if I didn't enquire and I hadn't studied and come into university, I would not know the history of the Aboriginal community.

These learner comments hint at the kind of accreted ignorances that can occur in families and societies where there is only a partial view of Indigenous Australia and where, as these learners suggest, little thought about Indigenous peoples or inequity is necessary. It is unsurprising then that those learners experience a strong sense of discomfort and discombobulation as they enter the liminal space of Indigenous Studies learning.

Further exploration suggested that educators are also aware that learners both know and do not know. The following comment from Wendy hints at the subtlety of this idea:

Yeah, it is interesting, I think for most of them [students], and I would say probably a big majority of them, are learning this stuff, some of the stuff we're talking about, for the first time in their lives. At school the Australians would have learned about Stolen Generation but no context of how that event occurred, then they learn that the Government apologised and so what's the problem?

The not knowing is different but no less challenging or emotive for Indigenous learners as educator Jennifer articulates very clearly:

For Indigenous students it can be different types of frustration... a result of having their identity and their very being challenged because they feel that they don't know who they are. When there's someone that they don't actually know, in terms of the lecturer, they don't know them personally, ...saying, this is who you are. This is who Indigenous people are. This is the experiences of our First Nations people of this country. They often put an expectation on themselves that they're meant to know that because they are Indigenous. But there's no way in the world that they can, and that's why they're in the class to gain that knowledge.

A different kind of not knowing is evident in the comment from educator Jane, which echoes the comments from Lara, the international learner, as well as some of the learners who had not grown up in Australia:

We're making a lot of assumptions that students understand what it's like to grow up here and a lot of them don't. Some of them have just arrived in the last few years.

### **Overlaying Emotion in the Liminal Space**

My analysis of the student narratives here suggests that students undertaking Indigenous Studies experience an additional emotive dimension that is different to an emotive facet of the intellectual challenge. Students might become frustrated when they fail to grasp or have difficulty comprehending the concepts such as gravity (science) or cost benefit (economics) but it is unlikely they will describe being shocked or angry. The emotion that these participants describe is because of *what* they are learning *about* not because they 'don't get it' or do not understand. There are two issues here. First is what causes the emotion and second is the depth of the emotion. In some of the examples below the topic is generalised, for example colonisation, in other cases it is related to something that happened in class. The learner voices here are discussing things that educators might hear in classrooms (or in their offices) but these expressions are less likely to be evident in

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written assessment tasks and yet the struggle and challenges students are describing here seem to be part of a process of coming to new understandings.

Learner John describes having his eyes opened, suggesting learning but the anger he expresses is related to his own life experience and perceived shortcomings in that situation. It is not anger because he is struggling to understand but rather because he now understands in a new way. John's frame of reference has shifted dramatically, as he explains:

...emotionally, I'm finding it a real eye opener. I get angry... The fact that I wasn't - I didn't know about all of this. That's probably the more frustrating thing - and again I do my best to step away from my own personal shit. I had to walk out and go in the hallway - in the stairwell that we just walked down, and I had a total friggin' meltdown. Writing one of my essays - one of my pieces last week - I'm sitting in front of the computer, and I had to stop.

John is clear here about his emotional response and can articulate that as anger. The use of the swear words gives some sense of the depth of feeling associated with the frustration and anger. As part of their studies, John's class attended a field trip to a museum which once housed a notorious children's home where Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families were housed. There were places like this all over Australia with many established under the guise of training institutions where Aboriginal children were prepared for domestic or pastoral service (Cole, 2005; Povey, 2019,) with most known for their harsh treatment of children (Sullivan, 2017). John reiterates the emotional challenge he is experiencing in relation to the site visit:

So, I'm finding it emotionally challenging because it does bring - and I made this very specific point when we went to the [children's home name removed] place recently. ...I am not even remotely putting myself in a position of the horror that I've since learnt about. But for some reason, we talk about certain things and we go to certain places, like [children's home] and there's a whole flood of memory that comes back and I find that really challenging.

Amelia, who also grew up in a region area of Australia with a significant Aboriginal population, in a community largely divided along racial lines, also experienced strong emotions as she undertook Indigenous Studies learning. Her experience reflects a combination of *what people have told me, what I've seen because for a lot of Aboriginal people in [town name] circumstances are such that they resort to alcohol or there's abuse in the streets or people try and steal from you*. Amelia explains that this experience was a large part of her childhood and what *I was growing up with that's what Aboriginal people are*. She was initially reluctant to undertake Indigenous Studies and goes on to describe her early reactions:

So, when I came to [city name] and started taking this and we started having speakers and getting material and lectures on what the actual culture is, that was like a big shock for me. It was really hard to - it did quieten down the voices and my experiences from [hometown]. So yeah, that's been really hard (Amelia, student).

Words on the page do not necessarily capture the magnitude of the challenge of this transition for Amelia and yet in this short passage her emphasis is telling. She twice uses the description *really hard* to depict her experience—not just hard but *really hard*—and the descriptor *big shock* rather than just a shock. The added discursive emphasis manages to convey major struggle in managing this new, powerfully counter-intuitive knowledge which provoked her tacit, deeply ingrained understanding shaped over a number of years and which has been reinforced by her family and society. Emphasising emotions in this way is a pattern that recurred for other learners.

Several learners were inflamed by their newfound understandings of systemic injustice. Kelly indicates that what she found difficult was *how complacent the system's probably been and how the depth of pain has been overlooked. I found that very confronting*. Kelly uses a more concrete example when she describes her classmates' lack of knowledge of an early twentieth century legislation, with wide-ranging powers to detain and control Aboriginal peoples:

Yes, but I'm talking even on a university level when the lecturer asked who knows about the 1905 Act, out of a class of maybe 150 kids, maybe 10 people put their

hands up. So that was really confronting, and it just highlighted a system that we're in, that is constantly smothering or camouflaging what's going on. I'm challenged with the fact this hasn't progressed the way it should have. I think I really struggled with that and that this has been a continuous conversation.

For learner Kelly the visual evidence of her cohort's ignorance, despite popular and educational efforts to the contrary, is forcing her to confront an apathy that she might not have previously considered. Melissa, another learner, perhaps sums up the emotional response to Indigenous Studies learning in the strongest terms when discussing what she finds most challenging:

Probably the background behind it all. What is - the invasion, colonisation, assimilation. I actually knew nothing about any of that. ...because it's just put so much guilt through me and such shock treatment that that's why it's made so much impact and you just can't help but go home and think about that...Huge amount of guilt and shock.

Tania, one of the Indigenous learners, also experiences an emotional response to her Indigenous Studies learning, albeit somewhat different to her non-Indigenous peers:

You're constantly talking about the continuous issues it has on Aboriginal people. It's not an Indigenous issue. I think some lecturers tend to label it that. I've come from many subjects and I get so grumpy because I think it's not an Indigenous issue. This is not a problem that was a part of our culture, it's a problem that was brought on us.

Tania's use of the word 'grumpy' reflects an individual emotional response, but it may also mask a more insidious issue that Indigenous young people come to university already expecting to have to fight and argue their case.

In contrast, Indigenous learner Mark's comment is devoid of the emotive language that the other students use and yet the words alone reflect a sadness and a sense of resignation that bears consideration, but which has potential to be overlooked in a crowded classroom.

Mark notes:

Yeah, I think just struggling with what was done to our people in their history and how humanity can - one group of humans can inflict that type of harm onto another group of humans just because of greed and wanting to take over the land and they didn't care what they did.

Jessica, a school leaver, who was nearing the end of her degree recalls a class from earlier in her studies, in a period she described as a *really rough year* where *we were unpacking whiteness and the theories around whiteness*. She remembers having to prepare herself mentally for the class explaining:

I'd often leave really upset or - but I think in the end that process was a real emotional and mental unpacking, although it might have left me crying after the class. It wasn't [educator's] fault. That's a part of learning is about really - if it's not making you feel something like that, I don't think it's worth doing. I don't know if that's quite what education should be about, but it was definitely probably the pinnacle turning point in my ability to understand other issues.

While she is explicit about the particular issues Jessica clearly connects the emotional struggle to a point of transition to better understanding of other matters.

Educators are aware that students may have emotional responses to Indigenous Studies teaching. As educator Jane notes:

It's just really challenging their ways of thinking about the issues. So many challenges, not the content in a way, although there will be content that will challenge them emotionally because they may not have heard of it. That might be confronting.

Additionally, educators are not only aware of the feeling that their subject area elicits but must also necessarily manage the results as educators Cara and Mary describe below:

Feeling it. Like emotion. I have had students actually email me and say - and it's like a real narrative of felt or feeling work that's happening. I felt anger and I felt

pissed off, and I felt sad and I felt shock. I [the student] didn't know what to do with that. I'm wrestling with this. I'll be like I think you should write about it. I think you should talk about it. That's coming through and then it's layered into their tutorials as well. I think that's the key (Cara).

I have had students come in crying into my office because they're just so distressed that they didn't know (Mary).

This liminal period is a time of vulnerability for learners as they renegotiate the “certainty and safety of known frame-works for understanding the world” (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015, p. 36). Given that formal higher education training is encouraged rather than a prescribed requirement for Australian university educators and that currently professional development is likely to focus on the mechanical aspects of curriculum, student learning and assessment, there is presently little to prepare educators for this aspect of their role. In this respect it seems that neither educators nor their students are particularly well prepared for this type of learning.

### **Supporting Threshold Crossing: Safe Classrooms**

Explicit in the threshold concepts framework is the notion that mastery of difficult disciplinary concepts will often occasion challenge and struggle for learners which may be accompanied by emotional responses (Cousin, 2010; Irving et al., 2019; Land et al., 2008). As I have shown above, learners who participated in this study experienced such challenges in this liminal phase of their learning. The importance of creating safe spaces for learning has now become a well-used facet of the teaching and learning lexicon (Boostrom, 1998) and is also in common usage in Australian Indigenous Studies (Bullen & Roberts, 2019b; McDermott & Sjoberg, 2016;). Indeed, the idea of safety in the classroom has become “so pervasive in the pedagogical literature that it is often presented as established truth” (Barrett, 2010, p. 1). Most of the educators I spoke to (five of the seven) said something about classroom safety. Students also used this language, with six of the 11 referring to this topic. The common usage of the term suggests that there is a shared understanding of the meaning and context, however it is worth examining the terminology for greater clarity.

There are several dimensions of the idea of safe classrooms or safe spaces, which are sometimes referred to as safe places, reflecting a physical aspect of safety as well as metaphorical. Early writing about safe spaces developed from school education and the desire to ensure that children were engaged and trusting rather than isolated in the classroom (Hawkins, 1987). The influence of feminist movements and the idea of safe spaces for women to speak about gender issues and gather outside of the domestic environment is also evident (Byron, 2017). Safe spaces are designed to enable learners to confidently express their thoughts and ideas (Barrett, 2010; Haidari & Karakus, 2019) and to support candid dialogue that is free of humiliation or judgement (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Safe spaces have become increasingly associated with inclusivity for under-represented and minority learners (Gayle et al., 2013) and with a degree of psychological comfort that learners must feel to be able to take cognitive risks (Barrett, 2010). Safe spaces allow “students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours” (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). As educator Cara indicates:

It’s no point belittling them and just going, you’re racist. You shouldn’t say those things, because that’s not going to stop anyone from saying those things or thinking those things. That’s what you want to get to. Why do you think these things?

There are critiques of the notion of classroom safety, which I will examine as an opportunity to shed fresh light on the utility of its use in Indigenous Studies classrooms. First, however, it is worthwhile to examine safety in the context of the study participants, which illustrates both the thoughtful pedagogical intent of educators, and the complex needs of learners, suggesting an alternative possibility to conceptualisations of safety in this context. The overall focus of safety for educators, in this study, is on fostering opportunity for discussion and dialogue, recognising that although discussion can be inherently difficult, it is ultimately, fundamentally related to learning.

### **The Need for Safe Classrooms?**

There are a range of reasons why the issue of safety in Indigenous Studies classrooms may be important. Learners and educators find some of the topics taught in Indigenous

Studies confronting and traumatic. There is also potential for racism and for nasty and hurtful things to be said, for example *when we're looking at pictures, students go, Aboriginal people are dirty* (Cara, educator) or as Luke (educator) suggests more generally, students *sometimes say really bad things*. Some students recognise the sensitivities of having a diverse group of students in the classroom, as student Julie notes *we have a couple of people in the course that have also come from war torn countries*.

One of the reasons classroom safety is important is because educators and students recognise the transformative learning potential in dialogue, yet are aware that the potential risk of racism, prejudice and disagreement are ever-present once discussion begins. As Cara notes:

...you need people to get those things out [negative comments] and say them so you can start to wrestle with it. Start to talk about it, start to understand where it's coming from.

Luke concurs, recognising the value to learning of exploring ideas:

But I suppose the way that I see the semester progressing is creating the safe space where people can ask any question they want, are free to explore the ideas, right or wrong.

Educator Mary sees that students' learning can have an impact beyond the classroom and that safety includes being able to discuss when this occurs:

We understand that the learning can go to the personal space as well. So, we try and set an environment where students can talk about how they're feeling. But it really has to be managed in a very sophisticated way because it can be really complicated.

The issue of 'triggers' arises for both learners and educators. For educators, personal concerns that are not related to classroom teaching can make teaching challenging topics all the more difficult. As Cara (educator) notes here in relation to a period of teaching:

Earlier that day I'd had something happen, which I won't tell you what happened. I was just fighting within and fighting without. Just going: is this really real? I need you [students] just to get on board with me now.

Conversely, Jane, (educator) was horrified when she failed to warn students that a particular visual resource touched on suicide:

This one has got some information on suicide in there. I, in my rush, I forgot to let everyone know. I know that can be confronting for the class.

As we've seen here and in the earlier section on emotions, under some circumstances the complexity of the classroom has the potential to become a cauldron of conflicting emotions. There is some agreement however, that total safety is neither ideal (Boostrum, 1998; Leonardo & Porter, 2010) nor necessarily critical to learning (Redmond, 2010). Indeed, the central criticism of the safe spaces is that critical thinking and intellectual growth is forfeited when safety and comfort are prioritised (Bartlett, 2010; Gayle et al., 2013). There is a risk that in giving primacy to safety that if "everyone's voice is accepted, and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow" (Boostrum, 1998, p. 407) or that learners might "avoid engaging with material of which they disapprove" (Byron, 2017, p. 116). There is a sense that a level of discomfort is required for learning to occur, particularly with topics that involve controversy.

It is this discomfort, the recognition of it, the support of it but critically the management of the struggle that is at the heart of the liminal phase of the threshold concepts framework. Participants in this study, both students and educators, recognise that some discomfort and risk are requisite for learning, particularly the difficult conversations which can underpin fresh insights. The resulting "paradox of participation" (Gayle et al., 2013, p. 1) is a delicate balance, because as some of these students note below, they were concerned about their safety (based on previous experience), which required self-management before they were 'comfortable' enough to tolerate the discomfort required to learn. As Gayle and colleagues (2013) indicate:

The more difficult the conversation becomes, the more risky it becomes to participate in the discussion. The danger is that considering emotional, enduring

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issues can stifle careful interrogation and deep learning. Risk-taking is part of academic life and intellectual growth, and participatory inquiry is at the centre of challenging pedagogy. (p. 1)

The educators in this study shared some of the approaches that they take to considering learner safety in the classroom.

### **Strategies Educators use to Create Classroom Safety**

Creating behavioural guidelines for discussions is “foundational to diversity and social justice learning activities” (Aroa & Clemens, 2013, p. 135). Unsurprisingly, educators used a range of strategies to foster safe classrooms, utilising a blend of structured and less formal activities. Structured activities included prepared tutorial activities and clear boundary setting, while more informal practises included using rhetorical approaches to tease out particular lines of thinking. Indigenous educators assume there is going to be prejudice and so to some extent are expecting it, as educator Luke indicates:

Even as a teacher, as an Aboriginal tutor, an academic, you have to have certain defences up in a classroom. (Luke)

The allusion to dialogic practises is woven into the educators’ practices as both Mary and Luke speak about their routines for trying to ensure that those discussions are safe, couched in the notion of respect.

That first three or four weeks is really about establishing the ground rules of how the discussions and the tutes (classes) will run, they have to be safe, there has to be a mutual respect between everyone ... particularly because we’re dealing with the really heavy concepts at the beginning (Luke, educator).

While these ground rules clearly have a protective function, they also act to exemplify disciplinary epistemology (Boostrum, 1992) and model ways of thinking and practising in Indigenous Studies. Here Luke emphasises the idea of mutual respect. As well, there is an acknowledgement that if learners feel safe enough to be involved in the discussion, then they are more likely to learn (Kaidari & Karakus, 2019). Mary is more explicit about what those ground rules might be:

We don't accept racism or discrimination, but we will talk to the ideas of race and racism. In order to do that, you need to set up an environment where there is respect and the ability to engage in ideas without offence.

What this also suggests is that educators expect that students are going to be racist or offensive. There is almost an acceptance of these difficult conversations, and these reflexive educators seek to anticipate, to the extent that it is possible, the risks to both themselves and other students of these actions. The setting up of such boundaries in turn creates space for students to ask questions, to get things wrong, without suggesting that students should “never be conscious of their ignorance” (Boostrum, 1998, p. 406).

Similarly, Jane (educator) creates learning activities to help new and inexperienced educators as they share the hosting of the liminal space:

...we've created really structured tutorial activities for new tutors that are coming into the field and don't know how to - we try and map that out to ask the questions that you might get and here are some suggestions. You're trying to pre-empt a lot of the stereotypes that you've heard along the years and then find a way to address that.

Jane notes wryly that it is not always possible to be prepared, indicating that there is *always a clanger that you haven't heard*.

Cara's example below suggests an approach to how educators might take to the unexpected comments in a classroom:

I don't like a one-sided lecture, I like it to be a talking space. I try to really open up a space where they can really say whatever they like...A student was safe enough just the other week to say 'I realise that I'm sexist, that I'm racist, and at times quite misogynistic'.

The learner's comments suggest a threshold crossing moment of realisation, illustrated in a discursive and reflexive shift in thinking, which would likely have been difficult to express without a safe learning environment. Cara's approach is two-fold. First, she recognises the futility of belittling learners, as we saw above, and second, she sees those

types of admissions from the student as a vehicle for deeper analysis of the underlying issues and concepts. In this sense the respect that Luke and Mary talk about above applies to both educators and students.

Jane (educator) uses what might be called distancing strategies, in this case for correcting students' using othering language:

...when the students get into, by accident or just out of habit, talking about them, ... they, them, those people. I can talk about it in a way that's not going to seem like an attack but just remind them that this can happen and a lot of books that they - texts that they read will talk about Aboriginal people in this way.

In another example Wendy (educator) uses an activity where she uses the location of a workplace to help students work through stereotyped attitudes towards Aboriginal people:

...these are the situations that you'll be facing in the workplace. You'll find that you will come across someone who is really racist or has some bizarre - or ideas, racist ideas or paternalistic ideas and may not be able to find the answer on that day, that you can answer those questions in another forum, in a safe forum.

By shifting the emphasis to a third party (in this case a fictitious, future colleague), students can work through ideas that some learners in the class may hold without the attendant personal scrutiny and emotion.

Returning to what might be considered another dimension of respect, Mary talks to students about self-care, acknowledging that their learning has some risks:

So I talk this idea of safety as well, that in your personal context, if these ideas have profoundly changed the way you see the world and it enters your personal space, it's about really looking after yourself and working through the ways that you can talk to these ideas which your family might have quite polarised ideas around this as well - but taking care of yourself is probably one of the messages I say, personally.

## Learner's Experience of Safety

Six of the 11 learners interviewed talked about classroom safety. What infuses these excerpts is not just the sense of the students own vulnerability but also the perception that the educator's attention to safety is worthwhile. There is little evidence of the concern of critics of safe classrooms, that learners withdraw when they encounter knowledges that they find threatening or disagreeable, eschewing critical thinking (Aroa & Clemens, 2013; Barrett, 2010). Because the learners come from a variety of backgrounds, there are nuances to the ways individuals discuss safety in the classroom. What is less well articulated is the reason why safety is necessary, although some students do allude to previous negative experiences which shed some light on the learning value in having safe classrooms.

Learner Alice, who describes undertaking cultural awareness workshops as part of her employment, compares her experience in the classroom with those workshops:

I guess, for me, in terms of what's been the easiest part about it, is just the feeling of safety within actually doing the course and that it's - how differently it's been taught than some of the workshops I did through work, and how I'm taking on so much more on board because I feel safe in it than I did when I was working.

Interestingly Alice makes a clear connection between safety in the classroom and her ability to learn, noting that previously, in the cultural awareness workshops, people's emotions were highly visible and *consumed the workshop time for me more than the actual material*. Julie also explicitly addressed the issue of safety, acknowledging the role of the educators in creating a safe space:

So, that's about a safety of - and they do that very well actually ... we share something [an item of personal meaning which is shared with the class] in your first week or two, something of significance to you and your culture. That breaks down barriers, but it doesn't help you to deal with I guess feelings that you might take on because of that. That's really - I mean - yeah, I thought I would be a lot more emotional and horrified and I'm not because of the way that it's delivered.

While positive about the feeling of safety, Julie suggests this doesn't always help an individual to manage their emotions. It is this aspect of liminality which might require more consideration. Ground rules about behaviour may be useful but without acknowledging or preparing students for the emotional responses which accompany liminality, particularly in Indigenous Studies, there is a risk that learners may still retreat into resistance and disengagement. This example from Amelia, who experienced discomfort and disorientation as she undertook Indigenous Studies learning, is illustrative:

I think speaking about it [her discomfort] definitely really helped, especially when you're learning, you don't realise how you sit uncomfortably about something until you start talking about it.

Being able to speak to her educator, in this case, was critical to supporting Amelia in this liminal phase of what was to be an enormously transformative learning experience. There is some suggestion that educators who value safe spaces “care about their students, and because they care, they eliminate the pain from education” (Boostrom, 1998, p. 405), yet that is not the evidence I see here. The educators certainly appear to care as they support learners, but they are also firm in setting boundaries such as not accepting racism. Indigenous educators (and their allies) are committed to improved outcomes for Indigenous communities and see this teaching as a vehicle for that aspiration (Asmar & Page, 2009). An alternative suggestion is that the educators are guiding learners as they navigate the liminal space, confident that many will have transformative experiences.

Group dynamics is part of learners feeling safe in classrooms. As we've seen earlier, educators are mindful of the need for respectful engagement in classrooms and work to create civil spaces where there is a balance between students being able to ask difficult questions and being able to make mistakes. The two learners below clearly articulate the connection this has to their ability to learn:

I think everyone's very respectful. Everyone's very open to asking questions. You learn when other people ask questions, all that stuff, so that's quite a supportive group, I find (Alice).

Well, I think it gets back to what I said. I think it is—well certainly the staff, the ability of an all-encompassing group of students that are not going to sit there and judge anybody in anything. That's absolutely critical. Again, that's fundamentally core to what we're learning here as well (John).

John notes that suspension of judgement of each other is vital to creating an environment in which learning can occur, but he also recognises that pejorative thinking about Indigenous peoples is similarly being discouraged. However fledgling his grasp of this idea is, he realises that openness and reflexivity are skills that students are being deliberately taught.

Mark, an Indigenous Australian learner, is clear about what makes a comfortable learning environment for him and why that is important for his learning. He recounted hearing the Indigenous educators talking *about how the language was used—racist language*, which helped him to contextualise some experiences from his own childhood *which makes me feel more comfortable—they [the Indigenous educators] get up and tell their stories*. Mark goes on to suggest this comfort occurs because *it's a really safe environment*. Comparing this learning experience to a negative (and unsuccessful) learning experience at a previous university he explains *you need to be comfortable when you're studying because study is hard enough. It's so stressful*.

Tania, a younger Indigenous learner, did not speak of safety or comfort but her obvious anger at having non-Indigenous staff teach Indigenous content was clear, as was the disengagement from her studies this sometimes caused. Concerns about the notion of safety in classrooms arise partly because what was conceived of as safe spaces for marginalised and minority groups seems to have been co-opted for the majority for whom “safety is a privilege, one that is often conferred on students who already occupy dominant and empowered positions” (Barrett, 2010, p. 7). Indigenous learners like Mark and Tania are already in institutional spaces in which they are overtly a minority, and which can be alienating and hostile places for Indigenous learners. It is the non-Indigenous students in Indigenous Studies who, as we saw as they entered the liminal space, find themselves in spaces where their usual dominance is reversed. It is not possible to remove the risk of discomfort for these learners (Aroa & Clemens, 2013). In the liminal space it is what we might expect and, as we see from the educator examples

here, they both expect some turbulence and organise the learning environment to facilitate safe passage through the space.

## Enhancing Threshold Crossing: Storytelling

Story was a topic raised by educators, students, and Elders. Although spoken about in different ways, sometimes positively and others negatively, story nevertheless emerged as a strong theme across all participant groups. For the Elders, it was the telling of their own stories which was important. The nuance and texture of their lived experience would often wend its way back to the archetypal story of their own Indigenous identities captured in comments such as, *I was born in [Sydney suburb], grew up with a lot of Aboriginal kids, ...Never had much schooling* (Uncle Jack); and *I'm Wiradjuri<sup>15</sup> and I grew up knowing that I was Aboriginal, lived an Aboriginal life. Mainly out in the bush* (Aunty Win).

As Lumbee scholar Brayboy (2006) argues, these stories “are our theories” (p. 426) illuminating notions of sovereignty, and relationality which have ensured community survival through the devastation of colonialism to the present. The Elders participating in this study also told stories of disconnection: *my eldest brother, he was taken to - Cummeragunja Boys' Home. He was taken there...* (Uncle Alec); and discrimination: *when I went to school, of course you get teased about being a blackfella, but you learn to live with that* (Aunty Mina); but also learning from Country, *Watch the animals, watch the birds. What birds and animals usually eat, you can eat* (Uncle Max) and solidarity: *all our mobs<sup>16</sup> are related* (Uncle Jack).

For educators, stories can act as counter-narratives (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Haynes Writer, 2008) which provide a “window through which to better understand” (Castagno, 2012, p. 5) the ongoing effects of colonialism. Storytelling reflects a belief in the legitimacy of experiential knowledge (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) of Indigenous Australians, providing “the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting” (Ladson-Billings 1998, p.13) of matters which learners participating in this study have

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<sup>15</sup> Large Aboriginal language group from Western New South Wales.

<sup>16</sup> Common Aboriginal English term for a group of Aboriginal people, usually related to a particular Country, but can be used more generally to refer to a group of Aboriginal people.

already indicated that they simply do not know. Stories hold both transformative potential for learners and personal risk for Indigenous Australian educators (and students) as Mary crystallises:

So, that [storytelling] can be affirming and confronting at the same time. I really believe that we use the idea of the counter narrative and storytelling as a way to bring to life the understanding of the theoretical ideas. It just helps articulate those ideas into a way that's accessible.

Non-Indigenous learners find connection, realisation and ultimately instruction in stories, which in many cases is the nexus to transformed ways of thinking. In this section I outline the findings in relation to deployment and reception of story by first outlining the findings related to educators and the use of story. Following that I show the range of ways in which students respond to stories. Finally, I summarise by suggesting how story acts in fostering learning.

### **Teaching Through Story**

The academy is often characterised as a place where there is “continued exclusion of other than dominant Western epistemic and intellectual traditions” (Kuokkanen, 2008, p. 60) and where there is a failure to “recognize indigenous epistemes grounded on different conceptions of the world and ways of knowing” (p. 60) and where Indigenous people’s voices are silenced (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022). However, in Australian Indigenous Studies classrooms this is much less the case, as often Indigenous educators design and lead the curriculum drawing on the diverse Indigenous scholarship and Knowledges to enrich classroom teaching. Kuokkanen’s (2008) invoking of the logic of the gift to remedy this failure of acknowledgement has utility in the context of Indigenous Studies teaching and in relation to storytelling in particular, incorporating the necessity to both recognise and accept responsibility for the gift. If we return to the metaphor of educators as the hosts of the liminal space (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015) then the storytelling becomes a “form of generous hospitality” (Bullen & Flavell, 2017, p. 568) which the educators give to facilitate passage through the liminal space.

Educators use a range of stories, including first person stories educators tell themselves, field visits, media material, in a variety of ways. There are three key ideas here: first the kinds of stories used; second the effects of storytelling, particularly their own, on educators; and finally, the value that storytelling may bring to learning. As Wendy (educator) suggests:

...if I can clearly see people are really struggling, I'll come back to that or I'll find some other resources that help to explain it, maybe using humour? Or maybe using other kind of formats, like some film or conversations, or even send them off to see something in [the local area]. ... On the Moodle site, I have a local person talking about, do you want to explore country, these are the places to go.

Educators will tell their own stories, in some cases, and in others will use the stories of others as exemplars of the ideas and theories that they are seeking to convey. When educators tell their own story, it may be as apparently simple as when an educator introduces themselves to the class, as the following example from Jennifer attests:

I think the other thing is breaking the stereotypes in terms of identity. So many students come in thinking - as soon as I get up and I say, I'm [language group affiliation] and this is where my family's from and so on, you can see that they're looking at you thinking, but you're not really Indigenous. But you're not really black. Look at the colour of your skin.

Each of these situations involves the sharing of something personal. Sometimes it includes telling stories that involve other family or community members. Mary indicates, *we use lots of Indigenous authors, ... we privilege Indigenous stories and authors in that.* There is now a rich set of storied teaching resources in both the news media and the cultural media (TV, film, theatre, music etc). Luke uses humour through YouTube clips of Aboriginal comedians. The humour itself often derived from lived experience. This use of humour, and other people's stories helps to keep some distance from the particular topic as Luke explains:

So, I threw up a couple of YouTube's of two Aboriginal comedians: Sean Choolburra and Kevin Kropinyeri, yeah so fantastic. It's not about engaging

students, it's actually another medium through which a student can have agency in their own lives so they can tell their stories in particular ways. It could be a funny story about a racist incident or a family incident or whatever it is, it doesn't matter, but it's a non-threatening way at humour.

Cara also uses stories from the news or sports media to draw attention to particular ideas. Racist incidents in sports are an ongoing source of teaching material for Indigenous Studies educators:

I try to use very current examples. I try to really keep abreast of what's happening in our world all the time. If something comes up one week, being about to use that and include that, no matter what the topic of the week is. The other week was ...[racism incident involving a football player]. Being able to use that, and it was actually really helpful and quite great that we were talking about media anyway.

Emma uses publicly available resources and those she develops and, in that way, often utilises the stories of others, for example using, *lots of online material, I've made quite a lot of podcasts, use Elders and guest lectures*. Jane hints at the ubiquity of educator stories, suggesting that *you've got the stories that you can pull out. That you can then tell the students about and they can make connections to the course content*.

### **The (Risk and the) Value of Storytelling to Learning**

One of the key criticisms of the idea of safe classrooms noted above is the notion that such approaches curb criticality and give learners licence to avoid topics with which they do not agree. While storying is not the same as safety this approach to teaching is part of an ethos of safety which educators in this study deployed. The learner accounts counteract both these criticisms, and within the limitations of self-reporting, the nuance here is powerfully suggestive of a method which helps students learn. I will come to the risks of storytelling, which I suspect should temper our enthusiasm, and certainly requires an institutional policy and professional development response, but first the learner responses bear examination.

## Learner Responses to Story in Teaching

Accepting the idea of storytelling as a gift suggests that the receiver may have reciprocal responsibilities, at the very least, to listen. The telling of stories is a social activity (Scott, 2011) and “creates a sense of immediacy” (p. 206). Melissa, a learner whose educators use storying in their teaching, shows how a story can help to reinforce information gleaned from more traditional sources:

As soon as I see a word politics or government in an article I'm reading, it just throws my brain for a six. Whereas yeah, so if it's a story being told to me, I can remember dates. I can remember usually names.

While reading and literature are the lynchpin of scholarship, multiple approaches to teaching are now well accepted in the learning and teaching domain. Melissa's response here underlines the strength of the personal account:

But it was more to hear the stories of the women and everyone through the lectures. I think it was week two, I reckon they had me almost yelling out 'I'm sorry'. When she spoke of her aunties and all of that. It was personal experiences... First person experience, you know, with their grandmas, everyone, their stories, that is powerful with the shock and the trauma.

There are signs of white guilt here in Melissa's desire to say sorry, as well as elements of emotion in the impulse to yell, both of which are to be expected in this liminal space where learners might be struggling to grasp concepts and where they are likely to experience both cognitive and emotive responses as they make sense of this new learning. Melissa goes on to explain, somewhat philosophically, hinting at an awakening realisation of the meaning of longevity of Aboriginal tenure on Country and a deepening understanding of inter-generational connections and legacy:

We're dreaming if we can fix this in a decade or two, we're dreaming. For as long as there are people to tell stories, and Aboriginals are great story tellers, they're going to remember what happened to their great grandmother, their great, great grandmother.

There are discursive and integrative shifts occurring here which reflect the threshold concepts framework. Kelly also notes an emotional response to stories that form part of the learning experience:

I know there are changes that have been put in place, but is it enough to actually make a change, a difference? I was challenged with the stories from the Stolen Generations, like the extent of cruelty that really rocked me.

While it is not stated explicitly here by Kelly, there is a sense that the stories told by members of the Stolen Generation, if not counter-intuitive, are certainly examples of difficult knowledge which Kelly is trying to integrate into her existing understandings. The idea of cruelty, so powerfully expressed in person and from experience, is the catalyst for a questioning of the status quo which indicates potential for a transformative shift in Kelly's thinking.

The emotion displayed by Alice is slightly different and reflects incredulity rather than shock or trauma, but is nonetheless strong, as reflected in her language. It is once again the stories that produce the effect but in this instance is tangibly tied to learning:

So, when I have got a bit stuck about something ... then I'll watch a video on it, then that sinks in for me because then I can see people and visualise it and absorb it more. That, to me, has gone really well, hand-in-hand. I really like - and there's lots of - I've been amazed at the documentaries and the footage from way back. I didn't even know half of that existed, so that's been amazing.

Alice's use of the word stuck is emblematic of liminality and resonant of Ellsworth's (1988) notion of stuck places. The *sinking in* and *absorbing* are such rich metaphors for the struggle to understand, both of which are occasioned *because ... I can see people*. Alice goes on to share her experience of a field visit to a former children's home:

It was a [children's home] visit, to the [museum] site, which is now a memorial site up in [location], which is five minutes from here. That was a practical thing. All that's fabulous. It's a real - it's not just a theory type subject.

Like Melissa and Kelly, Alice values the story and practical elements of the subject and juxtaposes this with theory in a way that the educators might find troubling, and which could be problematic for critical thinking:

Then there's - I think what's been amazing too is if I go on Ted Talks or the Facebook things and they'll say this is so-and-so who's the first Aboriginal female doctor. I'm going oh my god, is that just happening now? It's just a real eye opener.

Alice's comments here, at first glance, seem relatively superficial, punctuated by exclamation which might suggest not so much 'white guilt' as 'white surprise'. It is the final two sentences that signal something more complex and signifies a shift in thinking. A story about Australia's first Aboriginal female doctor, not from the distant past but relatively recently causes Kelly to question her existing understanding, to wonder critically about why this is only *happening now*, and finally the affirmation of the fresh perspective in noting it's a *real eye opener*. In this short excerpt it is the story that has precipitated the potential threshold crossing.

Jessica and Amelia both spoke about activities outside of their classroom contexts that involved stories and which they felt were helpful to their Indigenous Studies learning. Jessica shares her experience of an extra-curricular activity which involve stories:

Yeah, and it's just making sure I - even going to like an art gallery that's full of Aboriginal artwork from up north and there might be a speaker there from up north or just learning about the different mediums of expression. That's definitely something to facilitate learning rather than a barrier for challenge or a challenging barrier sort of thing.

Amelia participates in a co-curricular activity volunteering at a community legal centre with a significant Aboriginal clientele:

Yeah, I volunteer now at a legal centre, an Aboriginal legal centre in the city. To begin with, my volunteering was [because] it could add to my law, and they suggest that you come and get that experience. But then since I knew that I was

sitting on the fence a lot with Aboriginal people, I wanted to challenge myself to go into circumstances and see situations from a different perspective.

In this situation Amelia, who we learned in the previous chapter had quite strong negative opinions about Indigenous Australians because of her experiences growing up in rural Australia, is clearly seeking to grapple with this difficult knowledge through her voluntary work. In the volunteering role Amelia works with many Aboriginal clients:

So, a lot of the clients that we deal with are homeless or they've experienced a death, or they've got six of their grandchildren they're looking after and can't afford to pay their bills, they've got excessive bills. Before I took this unit, I just blamed them for that. Then now I say they're a victim of society.

This shift in thinking for Amelia is quite dramatic as she comes to understand the implications of structural racism and its effect on individual and their families. The value of the stories of lived experience for Amelia and her learning is summarised thus:

I find that my role at the legal centre was originally for legal purposes. But the clients that I now work with and the stories I hear, I think that's been really good...

To this point I have explored storytelling and stories from the perspective of learners who have found them valuable in helping to navigate the liminal space, to grapple with difficult knowledge and to develop new disciplinary perspectives. Stories, though, also involve the tellers, sometimes the original knowledge holders, and in some cases educators and students are the knowledge holders. Brayboy's (2005) assertion that Indigenous stories are our theories is a useful point of departure here. While Brayboy does not elaborate on this notion of story as theory, the educator participants in this study understand that theory is often derived from experience and deploy Indigenous stories to render disciplinary theory accessible.

Stories can act as conduits between complex theoretical concepts and lived experience. D'harawal scholar Bodkin-Andrews and colleagues (2016) suggest that Indigenous stories can be traditional or contemporary narratives. They draw on the D'harawal story of how the white waratah became red to explore controversies about the authenticity of

contemporary Indigenous Welcome to Country ceremonies, now commonly used to begin institutional and major public events. By sharing their traditional story, the authors encourage readers of their paper to make meaning from the narrative whilst illuminating theories of race, and colonialism. Similarly, Worimi scholar Thorpe and colleagues (2021) deploy stories told by Elders, when they take their pre-service teacher education students out of the classroom onto Country in a local neighbourhood rich with traditional and contemporary Indigenous Australian history. Through the Elders' stories, which are such a critical part of this pedagogy, "students to develop insight to the layered nature of Aboriginal knowledges that persist around them in the places they traverse in their everyday lives" (Thorpe et. al., 2021, p. 69).

### **The Risks of Storytelling**

It seems that storytelling and stories have a role to play in supporting threshold crossing and catalysing transformative learning experiences for students. However, as Tania, an Indigenous learner who was ambivalent about having non-Indigenous educators talking about Indigenous matters indicates:

So yeah, you didn't have that ...[you] need to have an Aboriginal perspective in your presentation, your Power Point presentation or in your thesis or in anything. Because it's just about - this isn't just Aboriginal history, it's about Aboriginal *people*.

The emphasis on people is mine, but Tania's point is that for Aboriginal people this history is not an abstraction (in a way that it sometimes seems for non-Indigenous learners) but is intensely personal. Mark also notes this:

I think just the fact that sometimes I feel that it's like you're - and you can see the expressions on people's faces in the classroom - you're telling a story and you're talking about some of the history and you're talking about it from a personal level.

Mark clearly sees the value to his classmates of sharing his stories, noting *I feel that's the best way to get it across to the younger generation* but there is a dilemma when Indigenous students become the teacher as his next comments illustrate:

Yeah, exactly. I do put a lot of personal aspects to a yarn. Someone will ask - like they thought the reverse of discrimination was happening when we were talking about kids in school and she [classmate] said well my kids go to a certain school and they see Aboriginal kids going into a separate room or they're going on cultural trips or things like that. They ask me, why are they getting that money? I could see that she was a bit apprehensive about raising that, but it was good that she did anyway.

An educator might see this discussion as a useful topic to explore ideas like discrimination, affirmative action, or structural racism, however we heard in the previous chapter that Mark can also find this type of discussion intrusive and not necessarily useful for his own learning. His generosity is evident though in his final comment that it was good that his classmate did raise the question, recognising as educators might, the opportunity for learning, despite his own reticence.

Educators understand the value of stories and storytelling and the role stories play in *communitas* and the building of a scholarly community which fosters learning and supports the liminal journey. Yet educators are not immune to the invasiveness of recounting their own stories or the retelling of those of others. Educators talked about the pitfalls of telling their own stories. Two issues occur here, the first that it can be demanding to tell and retell the same stories and second the response to the 'gift' of story can be unpredictable.

This is the challenging part, at a personal level, that you have to delve into a lot of personal experience. You have to tap into your own stories, your own family and your own histories to communicate some of these ideas. So, it becomes draining in that sense and sometimes after several years you do get a bit drained dealing with having to relay the same stories over and over again (Luke, educator).

There is no question here for Luke about sharing or about the utility of such stories in connecting to disciplinary ideas to support student learning. What is challenging is the repetition and sharing those stories to successive groups of learners. As educator Cara remarks in relation to fresh classes, *you might be new but I'm not*, illustrating the idea of repetition of not just course materials, which can be updated but also the resharing of the

carefully interwoven personal stories with each new cohort. Mary captures the ambiguity and unpredictability of sharing personal stories:

But we tell them, this [telling our stories] is an act of generosity. This is not easy to actually have to share your story all the time and hope that it will be received to explain how race theory has impacted on my life.

The munificence is obvious and similar to Luke, the sharing of story itself is unquestioned but although understated, the challenge is also evident, and the repetition is clear in the phrase *all the time*. Mary's articulation of hope, though, alludes to the possibility that while the sharer might plan and share a story willingly, the reception of the story by learners is always difficult to anticipate. Emma indicates that the sharing of her own stories has become too precarious, and she *uses much less of myself, in fact last year was the last year that I used my own stories*, citing that storytelling *has to be safe for me as well as for the students*. For me this reticence to share personal stories signals a paradoxical, yet unresolved situation, in which educators know that stories (both their own and those of other Indigenous people) can facilitate student learning and facilitate passage through the liminal space, but it can be personally challenging. In the next chapter we explore what occurs when learners experience threshold crossing and have transformative learning experiences.

## Chapter 6 Post Liminal: Transformation and Reintegration

*Well, I think that single lens I have been looking through has been shattered.* Kelly, learner.

In the previous chapters I explored the pre-liminal experience of learners and educators as new Indigenous Studies classes occur, along with the challenging liminality and the subsequent troublesomeness that all students in this study experienced to some extent. I illustrated the sorts of behaviours students reported - and educators observed - of the associated struggle and subsequent threshold crossing. In this chapter I discuss the research findings associated with the transformative aspect of the threshold concept framework. The threshold concepts framework characterises transformative learning as: learners being able to think similarly to discipline experts (Meyer & Land, 2003). The acquisition of threshold concepts develops a student's disciplinary language. This might also precipitate a change in learner subjectivity or sense of self, and in some disciplines results in:

...powerful effects as, for example, when first year students of Cultural Studies report their recognition of the implications of the concept of 'hegemony' for the ways in which their personal choices and behaviour might be culturally constrained, determined or gendered. (Meyer & Land 2005, p. 375)

The post-liminal phase is characterised not just by change, but also by the idea of reintegration into society or community (van Genneep, 1960). For the learners discussed here, this usually means returning fully to their disciplinary study.

The chapter begins by setting the scene for the learners' experiences by outlining educators' aspirations for student transformation. For all the educators interviewed for this study, there was a greater good overtly buttressing their curriculum and practice. While the student journeys stand-alone powerfully, this juxtaposition of educator desire for their students to work more effectively with Indigenous Australians and the learner outcomes described here, sharpens the latter beyond feel-good stories. Drawing on a liquid metaphor which reflects Meyer and Land's (2005) notion of transformation as varied, I developed a schema to highlight the fluidity and non-linear character of the

transformations occurring. The schema reflects the magnitude of the transformation, both cognitive and affective. Finally, the chapter discusses a little mentioned aspect of transformative learning – namely, the costs of the transformation. Although the costs are different, both educators and learners can experience unforeseen outcomes in Indigenous Studies settings. Experienced educators have some awareness of what those costs will be, but learners are unlikely to have much, if any, sense of the potential implications.

## **Imagining Transformation: Indigenous Educators' Perspective**

In this study most educators reported that they recognise that many students will come to their Indigenous classrooms with little knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and/or without having given much thought to their own cultures, reflecting a colourblindness that tends to view whiteness as invisible (Gillborn, 2005) and Indigeneity as other. Furthermore, most learners gave little indication that they had thought about how those cultures affect their view of the world. Educators develop curriculum thoughtfully to enable students to engage with and learn a body of knowledge and to acquire a set of skills. The educators I spoke to were also cognisant of preparing students for a discipline other than Indigenous Studies (as noted earlier, most were teaching both students opting to undertake the Indigenous Studies subject; and students who were undertaking the subject as a mandated part of a degree). As well as teaching their own discipline area, these educators were also thinking carefully about student's home disciplines, and how to ensure that the curriculum creates the necessary synergies, so that their teaching of Indigenous Studies becomes relevant to the discipline area the student is studying.

The educators were aware that students needed to develop a body of knowledge and they also were very clear that *learning history is not just for the sake of it* (Jane). While it was articulated in a variety of ways, there was a very clear sense that the educator's expectation of transformation in learning is that the student's new knowledge should be applied in practice. One educator, Luke, explained:

we're always in their discipline mode, ... we're kind of doing two jobs at once. It's almost like catching up on Indigenous histories; contemporary issues; Indigenous knowledges; but then you've also got the profession expertise at the same time.

Other educators unambiguously indicated it was critical that students be able to apply their new Indigenous Studies knowledge in the home discipline or professional context. Educators Mary and Jane make this clear. Mary, who teaches mostly learners in the professional disciplines, indicates the strong connection between her Indigenous Studies teaching and graduate practice:

So, the end point, I think, is how they transform their body of knowledge in order to be better at what they do in their profession.

Jane is explaining the need to make very clear for students what they can do with their Indigenous Studies knowledge and how the learner can contribute to improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians as graduate professionals:

...where we're talking about learning and how it's applied... I would say the students talking about what they can do, but in a constructive way... providing explicit connections between that [Indigenous Studies learning] and their [home] discipline, the things that they will be doing, is really important for us to work out and help map for them, I would say (Jane).

Emma made the connection between theory (knowledge) and broader practice-relevant abilities, hinting at an affective transformative element:

because I think that if people can unpack that and see how whiteness plays out in society and in their own lives, if they can really deconstruct that in particular ways, I think that a greater empathy would be developed which could actually be transformative in a broader sense so that would be my number one.

This emphasis on the translation of Indigenous Studies teaching into disciplinary practice outcomes is an area that gains little attention in a higher education sector where there are too few Indigenous scholars to meet the current disciplinary requirements. Jane and Mary have both Indigenous Studies and professional backgrounds in the professional area where they are teaching, which makes this translation less challenging. However, in key fields such as pre-service teacher education for example, this dual expertise is not

necessarily always available (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012) meaning this explicit connection between Indigenous Studies and disciplinary practice may not be forged.

The application of Indigenous Studies learning in practice was not the only consideration for this group of educators. For some educators, the transformative purpose might be more general; for example, as Wendy (educator) gratefully acknowledged of a group of international students:

But the fact that they did it [Indigenous Studies subject] and went home and wondered whose country they were on - yeah and wanted to know more about the [local Indigenous] people. So, I think that that's the best you can hope for really.

While the application of Indigenous Studies learning to practice was considered important by the educators in the study, there is another, deeper dimension to the educator's understanding of transformative learning, as Jennifer explains:

I think through Indigenous Studies the challenge of trying to get them to acknowledge the injustices of the past and get them to accept the fact that it was a result of this country's government, is very, very difficult.

The kind of transformation touched on here resonates with the original threshold concepts notion of transformative learning as involving a shift in worldview (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005) and more general theorisation of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1998). Jennifer went on to elaborate further:

I think when they can accept responsibility in a way that isn't patronising, when they can plan for the future. When they can see their individual role in making better sense of what is horrible history and a better future for the country. I think also when they look around them, like to their local community, and think how can I personally contribute to this?

Although practise is not mentioned overtly here, the references to being able to plan for the future and contribute to their local community do indicate an active engagement with Indigenous Studies learning.

This interweaving of disciplines and professions which have traditionally had poor engagement with Indigenous Knowledges or Indigenous Studies topics such as colonialism or race theory is complex, and too often left to the Indigenous Studies educators to manage. The transformations imagined here are not the kinds of transformation that can occur with superficial approaches by either educators or learners; they require deep engagement by both, in often challenging but ultimately rewarding circumstances.

## **How Learners Experience Transformation**

As educators, we tend to ‘know’ our students through their assessment tasks, and if we teach in physical classrooms, we might hear their semi-formal responses to discussion topics in lectures or tutorial classrooms. In each of those cases, we are less likely to hear about the many and varied ways in which students are developing in their learning. In those formal situations, learners are responding to taught curriculum, which is commonly knowledge-based. Even where reflection is called for, student responses are constrained by a range of elements such as the learner/educator dynamic, grade expectations, peers, or level of preparation. The interview circumstances gave my learner participants an opportunity to share their encompassing life and educational experiences and to reflect on how those factors combined in learning. As we will see below, the learner responses are rich and authentic and reflect being in various parts of the transformative learning journey.

In a rite of passage generally, a transformation includes a clear change of status (van Genep, 1960). The novice re-emerges into society in a clearly changed form. For example, youths who enter initiation rites emerge as young men, or a bride’s status changes from single to married. Both join a new community. For learners, this change is neither so clear-cut nor obvious, and as the threshold concepts framework suggests, the learning of particular concepts may lead to irreversible changes in perception, but also may be bounded. To reflect this transitory nature of transformations for the learners in this study, I developed a schema to capture some of the magnitude and depth of the transformation but also to allow a more nuanced consideration of the idea of transformation. The schema has three categories, which reflect generalised, global responses through to embodied change.

In the development of these categories, I initially used the terms, ‘skimmers’, ‘dippers’, and ‘divers’ which assigned the attributes to learners themselves, drawing inspiration from Cousin’s (2006a) work in Communication, Culture, and Media Studies. In considering observations of learners grappling with the idea of “otherness” Cousin (2006, pp. 140-144) suggested there were four ideal learner types, including the spectator or voyeur, the defended learner, the victim-identified learner, and the self-reflexive learner. This characterisation was intended to show variation in student responses to the idea of ‘othering’. These labels are interesting and relevant here—I could, for example, have had some success in applying those labels to the learner responses seen here. The defended learner, for example, tends to see things in simple binaries, without interrogation of their own positions, and sees others as “remote and victimised groups” (Cousin, 2006, p. 140). However, as I thought more about my schema, it seemed that what the assigning of labels did was to suggest a fixedness to the categories, which undermines the processual nature of transformation being explored here. My argument, using the threshold concepts framework, is that labels should be attributed to behaviours and responses that have the potential to change rather than to the learner themselves, reflecting the transformative possibilities for learners as well as the process outlined in the rite of passage. I use learner responses in multiple categories, to underline the notion of fluidity. In the liminal space, learners can experience ambivalence and partial transformations, and they may mimic responses they assume are expected of them by educators (Mohamed et.al., 2016), as they grapple with the new learning. For some learners, the outcome of liminality may be complex and partial (2016). These are not fixed categories attributed to learners but rather ways to explain or consider particular kinds of learner responses and what those responses might suggest about a student’s trajectory within the liminal space.

## **Skimming**

Skimming describes learner responses that suggest transformation but that are more global statements with little description of the change in perception or action that has occurred. Alice, for example, is emphatic but not specific about the details of her shift in understanding, although she does connect her learning to self-improvement:

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I just think that it's been just a real eye opener. I can't remember learning any of this in school...even if I only absorb a quarter of what I'm being taught, I'm going to walk away from it a better person with more knowledge than I did before.

Julie also is clear about a change in her thinking, linking this to her sense of socio-cultural location:

...let's say but I guess now I'm getting the whole in-depth of what sits under that iceberg from an Indigenous perspective and not from a colonised perspective. So, yes, it's very much just brought a greater depth of understanding and knowledge to my place within Australia.

Melissa, speaking in relation to a future research project, notes:

...everything I'm being taught here is going to absolutely inform that because the way I thought it might occur, in my naïve view six months ago is - not turned on its head - but it's better informed.

Melissa further explains, although still in quite general terms that Indigenous Studies *just makes you look at the entire world instantly through a different lens. Instantly. Yeah.*

Educators notice these beginning or more superficial changes as learners cross conceptual thresholds. Wendy, speaking particularly about international students, indicates:

A good percentage of the class you'll probably start seeing that, they'll start talking or they'll relay it back to their own world wherever they've come from. So, you see that, and the students from overseas will then start saying, oh actually calling the mascot a redskin is pretty miserable.

For international learners who do not see immediate Indigenous parallels in their home countries, shifting perceptions sometimes occur when travelling in Australia. As Wendy elaborates, a learner might notice:

the tourist guide was non-Aboriginal, taking them for a tour on country. So, they'll make these comments. Even if they're not really sophisticated but they've made

them and at first year, ...So yeah, I see that they're actually engaged in thinking while they're out so yeah, to me that's awesome. I get thank you emails saying that wow they've understood Australia in a different way.

## Dipping

For some learners, transformation will occur in the form of small revelations which will re-orient their understanding of themselves, the world around them, or even the past. Learners who I characterise as dipping are experiencing new ways of thinking but are continuing to grapple with their ideas, as might be expected as they traverse the liminal space. In the threshold concepts framework, transformation is usually, though not always, associated with irreversibility (Meyer & Land, 2005) and facilitates integration of knowledge through illuminating connections between concepts (Rountree et al., 2013) or between theory and practice. For learners at this stage of the liminal journey, knowledge “becomes less tacit and more explicit, discursive, and conscious, at least for a time—they not only know what they know, but they are also more likely to recognise how they know it” (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012, p.2). The examples below show learners making connections and beginning to articulate more clearly the particular ways in which their Indigenous Studies learning is shaping new understandings for them. These are more than generalised statements of transformed understanding in which the learners are dipping more deeply into Indigenous Studies.

Kelly, a learner who did not grow up in Australia and felt that there were many things about Indigenous Australia of which she was ignorant, explains how her thinking has changed and even indicates a potential commitment to ongoing development:

So, for me learning about the history of Australia and moving forward for future generations, my children and their children, is really working on how to integrate. Not Aboriginal people with me, but me into the Aboriginal culture and acknowledge that in daily life.

Kelly is not suggesting here that she should be part of Aboriginal culture but that she should recognise and acknowledge the culture that surrounds her and which she had been blind to in her day-to-day life. While the focus in an Indigenous Studies classroom is

often on the majority, non-Indigenous learners, Indigenous learners also describe transformative experiences, although they are likely to be different in character. For example, Mark recalls a family story that now made much more sense:

I used to go to the mission and sit on the ground with nanna and we'd hear stories and she'd break out in some little songs. It's all about that education - she'd talk about stuff and then if she sees a strange car in the distance coming in a station wagon into the mission - come on you kids [wani wani<sup>17</sup>] coming. Then get under the bed. I always wondered why she was saying all that stuff when I was young...It didn't make sense. Then as I got older, I learnt that and why she was doing that. Then doing this course puts a lot of things in perspective.

There is a clear change in understanding evident here in Mark's account, which is likely to be irreversible and will almost certainly lead him to ask new questions about Indigenous history as a discipline expert might. Speaking about the change in mindset of his classmates, Mark comments on a different kind of identity-related transformation for himself, as a result of his Indigenous Studies learning:

A lot of the students, the attitudes have changed. For example, one of the students said 'I supported Andrew Bolt<sup>18</sup> and my opinion has changed'...So you look around and you're proud of your culture. Not that I'm not proud of my culture. I've learnt that a long time ago that I don't care what happens, what people say to me, I'm always proud of my culture and proud of my family though because that's my family I'm talking about - my culture, my history. ...these lecturers are getting up with all this knowledge and skill combined with the culture and being able to stand up and what's the word - display or communicate the culture out there to the broader audience.

Although this student speaks at length about pride in his culture, he is experiencing an unexpected, renewed sense of pride in the classroom environment. This is a student, clearly long used to negative interactions about his culture, who has developed an almost

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<sup>17</sup> Indigenous language. Mission officials were often recognisable from the vehicles they drove, and children were hidden in an attempt to prevent them being removed by the authorities.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Bolt is an Australian media personality known for his right-wing views.

retaliatory veneer (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). This augmented pride ensues despite being in a classroom dominated by non-Indigenous students, many of whom are challenged by their new learning environment, as we have seen in the earlier chapters, and not always sure of how to respond to a fellow classmate who is Indigenous. These classroom experiences are not always positive for Indigenous students. However, for this student, there are two key factors; the concurrent transformations of his fellow students and the skill of the Indigenous educators who ‘stand up’. It is also possible that this student’s maturity is a factor in being able to manage the discomfort of this situation and even build his own sense of pride.

International students can also have transformative experiences, although they will have a different kind of application, as Lara notes:

On the other hand, we do have a lot of immigration, so in a way we have our own problems with people from different ethnic backgrounds. I feel like everything I learned here, all the ideas about - yeah, about whiteness, but also just seeing history from how colonisation works - because that is a part that we do have. Colonisation is also in [home country] history, obviously. That is really interesting, because in a way it also changes the way I look at our own history about slave trade, how that could have happened. ...Yeah, I've definitely changed the way I look at these issues.

Lara is clearly making connections between her understandings of her own country’s history and what she is learning in Indigenous Studies. She is integrating what she is learning about colonial history in an Australian context with the global effects of colonisation. It is likely this is a shift in perception that will open up new ways for her to think about her own country.

Luke (educator) sees a learner’s shifts in perception reflected in the changing questions his education professions students ask when he is teaching the group about classroom practice, noting that learners inquire eagerly:

how do I do this or who do I approach in the community if I want to do this sort of activity? How could I find out? They’re asking questions about resources now,

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so how can they pull the resources into their classroom and that's really difficult for teachers, finding the information to begin with.

This change in student language and questioning is consistent with the discursive element of the threshold concepts.

## Diving

Some students in this study underwent apparently life-changing transformative learning experiences. These profound changes align with what the educators saw as deeply transformative: knowledge-based, practical but also filtering into the way students behave in the wider world. Diving is characterised by two key, intertwined features: action and agency, which combine to create an activism that is becoming more evident in classrooms, as researchers look beyond the resistant student. Worimi scholar Thorpe's recent (2018) doctoral research began with the intention of exploring student resistance in initial teacher education with students doing mandatory Indigenous Studies as part of their degrees. The final findings of the study, though, pointed to what she called activist students who were energised by their learning and actively seeking ways to contribute to improving Indigenous education (their discipline) and the nation more broadly. Individual action and agency are strongly suggestive of transformative learning in the student responses here.

Individual franchise is at the heart of the Australian democratic system. Kelly, activating her new knowledge, explains that her re-framed understanding has changed her thinking about her discipline area, but has also galvanised her personal behaviour as well:

...the unit, yeah it's just opened my eyes that I've been part of the system that perpetuates a colonial system. It's changed in the sense - even now with the vote, I've really looked at what - who am I actually voting for, because I don't want to be part of that. So, it's just raised my consciousness on many levels.

Although Kelly finishes this excerpt by talking about raised consciousness, there is much more occurring here. She displays a sophisticated interplay of critical reflection, shifted thinking, and judgement, applied to the act of voting. Not only does she now recognise systemic disadvantage, Kelly uses that knowledge agentially to consider something as profoundly political as voting.

It's evident from her explanation below that Indigenous Studies has begun to permeate Kelly's life beyond the classroom. She is starting to take on an activist role:

...me thinking about Indigenous studies at university level made me question what my children are learning. Do you know? What are you learning about the Indigenous community? I raised that with my daughters' schools and said to them, where is the Aboriginal flag, I don't see it flying. It should be. You have Indigenous students on your ground which is their land. Why is the flag not up?

Taking action, such as raising an issue at your child's school, implies a sense of agency that is worth explicating further here. It would be easy to assume that this was a parent who was accustomed to advocating for her children. That may be so. Yet, there are two factors which might suggest that her action is a result of her Indigenous Studies learning. First, the issue was raised in direct response to her thinking about the topics in her Indigenous Studies class. Second, the issue does not directly affect her children. In this case, the student's action simultaneously addresses issues of sovereignty (*'their land'*) and the rights of Indigenous children to have their heritage respected (*'you have Indigenous students on your ground'*). Finally, she acknowledges the Indigenous absence in her own experiential landscape and is seeking to remedy this for her children (*'thinking about Indigenous studies at university level made me question what my children are learning'*). The *action* is so obvious that it is possible to overlook the *agency* required to undertake such action in a society where Indigenous matters continue to be polarising (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Paradies, 2016; Sjoberg & McDermott, 2016).

For another learner, Jessica, who was one of only two students in this cohort to have relationships with Aboriginal Australians outside of the university context, having Aboriginal friends was fertile ground to facilitate her transformative journey. Jessica describes action outside of the classroom, this time in an overtly activist, although not yet an entirely critical manner:

I started following RECOGNISE Australia<sup>19</sup>. I thought that was a really great campaign and I really jumped on the bandwagon because that's what I thought

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<sup>19</sup> Recognise was an organisation raising awareness of the need to include Indigenous Australians in the Australian Constitution.

that local communities were after... But I didn't - I wasn't - I don't think I was critical enough of actually who is this run by, how many people really support something like this, what does it mean. So now it's quite a lot more into treaty and so I guess being exposed a lot more to those outside of university areas that I was talking about, like friends and volunteering and just going to community events.

A developing criticality was vital for this learner. She is coming to understand that Indigenous Australia is not homogenous and that there are nuanced arguments and disagreements. As Jessica indicates below, learning the course material was the tool she used to examine, and then shed, deeply held epistemological leanings.

Yeah, and I've learned along the way how important power and privilege is. I think that's really essential to the learning process. For me being able to learn a lot more about minority issues and Indigenous issues is being able to completely unpack my own identity. I think that was a core part of the curriculum in my [humanities] degree in getting me to that place, in getting me to be able to really critically look at and understand things at a completely different level.

This comment suggests an intellectual growth consistent with the idea of transformativeness as maturation and points to the possibility of life-long learning, which the educators sought to achieve.

## **Reintegration: A Whole (Learner) Story of Transformative Learning**

There is clear methodological value in taking a grounded approach to data analysis or applying a particular theoretical lens. For this study, I have combined these methods, which, consistent with the methodological approach, has tended to disaggregate individual stories. While using participant names associated with the quoted responses enables the reader to maintain some connection between responses, gaining a sense of an individual's voice, it is nevertheless more difficult to have a sense of a whole story. Given that this study has some focus on transformative learning and particularly the idea of learning in Indigenous Studies being understood as a liminal journey, I want to now draw a learner journey together in order to illustrate the rite of passage as potentially experienced by one learner.

While some learner participants in this study may have had difficulty articulating the detail of their transformative learning, others were able to discuss at some length the changes wrought by their Indigenous Studies learning. One student, Amelia, was able to elaborate in a particularly vivid ways, which illuminated a seismic epistemic shift. Little in this young person's life remained untouched by her new understandings. It was almost as if a veil had fallen from her eyes and she could no longer see herself, her family or her hometown in regional Australia in the same way. Depicting a whole story rather than thematic representation can be insightful for research (Bold, 2012). I reintegrate Amelia's story here to illustrate the ways in which her understandings have been transformed. Discursive change is a threshold concepts criteria which suggests that as learners grasp new concepts their language and dialogue increasingly reflect disciplinary discourse (Randall et al., 2018). Amelia's response below shows her asking previously unimagined questions about her mother's car locking practice:

Mum will always lock her car whenever we drive past a group of Aboriginal people, but she won't do it when it's a group of white teenagers, and I've always - like now I say to her, why did you lock your car? Oh, I just always lock my car. I'm like, no; you always lock your car when you see a person of colour.

Communicative learning for this student extends beyond the classroom to this kind of discursive questioning occurring here. Amelia is testing her new knowledge and actively wrestling with what she is coming to understand as a set of pre-existing assumptions (Atherton et al., 2008; Fouberg, 2012; Mezirow, 1987) In the following excerpt, Amelia is reflecting on an interaction with her mother about something as apparently innocuous as the circumstances in which she locks her car. Amelia is on a visit back to her hometown, and she alludes to the role and one of the sources of the accreted tacit knowledge that has informed her own thinking up to this point.

It's never - and if she [mother] doesn't lock it when it's a group of white teenagers I'm like, you didn't lock your car, mum. She's like, oh yeah, the car just locks itself. She kind of like diverts from that and I think that's a lot of the attitude in [hometown] they just don't - it's just so innate now. It's just part of their - so when you go home and you try and change that around or you contest or you kind of like rattle it, like I do a little bit, it's like, don't talk about that, that's not what

happens. Because I don't want to admit that they are racist but it's so subconscious...

Amelia's use of the words *innate* and *subconscious* reflect the deeply ingrained understanding (Polanyi, 1966) that develop in families and societies supporting ignorance, and embedding tacit knowledge so deeply that it becomes habitual and unconscious (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). It is clear that Amelia has begun to relinquish her "customary ways of seeing things" (Land et al., 2014, p.200).

Amelia's questioning of her mother's motives suggests that not only has her frame of reference shifted considerably, but Amelia is showing signs of being able to think like a discipline expert (Meyer & Land, 2005), and there is a strong sense that this shift is irreversible (Meyer & Land, 2003). The language Amelia uses here is telling. The use of the word racist attests to the potency of the shift.

I notice that now, especially from my learning, that even the way Indigenous people are spoken about in my family or in my community, [is] so racist, and I was just contributing to that.

Amelia sees her hometown in regional Australia, which has a significant Aboriginal population, in a quite different way since she has undertaken Indigenous Studies. She is becoming aware of the permanence and erasure of the settler colonial structures (Tuck & Yang, 2014), as she indicates:

I don't see many Aboriginal people employed, to be honest, in any of the businesses in [hometown]. Yeah, that are already set up or some legal departments, but that's when Aboriginal people have their own department, so they've got people in that office. So, it's never like in your local [bakery] or your local butcher's. It's all white people.

Amelia previously shared her experiences of working in a supermarket to financially support her studies. She recalled the discriminatory application of a policy to check customer bags at the checkout, which in practise was mostly applied to Indigenous Australian shoppers. When Amelia asked to check the bags of non-Indigenous customers,

she often encountered indignant responses from customers who were eager to assure her that they were not Aboriginal, noting:

Yeah, and people get so irate about it that you could - how dare you assume that they're a shoplifter, and inside I'm like, well, how dare you assume that just because they are a colour of skin that they are a shoplifter.

There is a sophistication to Amelia's response to the angry patrons but also to her ability to see the connection between the non-Indigenous customers' antagonism and the implied assumption that the local Aboriginal people are shoplifters. Amelia reflects on the difficulty of having those conversations with her customers, noting, *I don't want to go into those conversations, but that's what I'm thinking*. The growing discipline expertise in being able to identify covert racism is evident, but it is the next comment that most strongly indicates a transformative learning experience:

Before I wouldn't have thought that though. Before I would have just said, oh yeah, you're probably right, they probably would have stolen something. But now I'm just like, no.

Amelia indicates that she has regular Indigenous customers who she now considers friends, but she experiences both overt and covert disapproval from her work colleagues for this fraternisation:

Then I start talking and laughing and chatting with the family and it's almost like, I get looked at, like why are you doing that? We're not friendly with Aboriginal people, they steal from us, and that's kind of me really conflicting as well because at the same time I'm learning different - and we have conversations about things that I'm learning and I talk about things like their culture and stuff and it's almost like, you don't do that, [at shop name]. That's not how society works; it's not how we do things here.

Becoming consciously alert to unconscious biases is a critical element of transformative learning (Dirx, 2012). When Amelia began her Indigenous Studies learning she might have been described as an almost classic resistant student. By her own admission she was

sullen, withdrawn and did not want to engage with what she was learning. Her passage along the liminal journey, from the novice who entered the liminal space reluctantly and who experienced considerable emotional challenge, which reflects liminality, yet has emerged with a considerably changed outlook that has not only enhanced her learning but has influenced her selfhood.

## **The Costs of Transformation**

Transformative learning is what we are seeking when teaching. There is surely something new for each student to discover afresh. The potential for transformative learning is what drives educators, as have outlined above, realised particularly through enhanced professional graduate practice. The types of transformations discussed here, though, do not come without cost. I have previously explored the emotional dimension of liminality and the associated troublesome knowledge. Here I want to delve further into the nature of the costs, which occur for both educators and learners, although in different ways. Although educators are seeking transformation in students, they may be less aware of, and consequently less likely to prepare students for, the broader effects of such transformations. While transformation in relation to new knowledge is to be expected and the connections to action are desired outcomes, for this cohort there were other less positive outcomes. While no one spoke with regret about these hidden costs, they were not necessarily expecting or prepared for such changes. For a number of the learners who participated in this study, their new learning brought them into conflict with their families and friends.

## **Altered Relationships with Family**

Some learners had a desire to share their new knowledge with their families. For younger students, this meant talking to their parents and siblings, and for older students, it led to consideration of their children. For Kelly, her learning in Indigenous Studies led her to reconsider her children's education and she wanted to share the new learning with her teenage children, who were studying American history at school but very little Indigenous Australian history:

So, for me, I think moving forward would be to want to be part of any process that encourages a working together process and creating constant awareness within

my immediate family...So I think that's kind of where I've taken what I've learnt and my children know this. I think that's important because I'm passing over the awareness for them too. Because when I was doing the unit I would say to the kids, do you know about the freedom rides? ...No, they didn't know... We should be learning about our own history.

But the desire to share can lead to unexpected outcomes. Amelia wants to talk to her family, *because I always ring up mum or my sister and tell them what I've been learning*, but it creates tension as she explains:

I think just learning about where I sit now, my opinion and my values towards Indigenous people, and especially when I go home and I say something and my friends and family go, well, that's not right, or they will shut me down or they will go, but you haven't seen the people on our street or something, ...and if I do say anything it's always in like - but mum knows that now. She called me the other day and she's like, what are you going to say in their defence? I'm like; it's not their defence, mum...

There has been an obvious shift in this student's relationship with her family, which adds a fresh element of discomfort to the learning of Indigenous Studies. There is, however, a corresponding sense of assuredness in Amelia's new position. She does not necessarily shy away from her reframed stance, clearly indicating that she is not defending the local Aboriginal people, rather she is seeing the world in a new way. Amelia demonstrates a confidence here that also suggests a new autonomy in her thinking.

Indigenous educators, who are often themselves familiar with issues and experiences of racism, recognise that learners may experience such negativity, even from their own families, as Wendy explains:

...some of the students they learn this stuff, they go home and sometimes they have parents or grandparents who hold some quite racist ideas. ...so they actually get all this negative feedback from the rest of the world, like why are you doing that? Oh, those bludgers and all this stuff. I have to give them skills to combat that, to manage it. Otherwise, it's just, they're in a state of anxiety.

In this case, Wendy explicitly prepares students for dealing with racism, recognising the inevitability of these encounters and noting that:

...you're never going to defeat this, but you don't have to participate in it and you can call people on it. You can just simply say to them or comment, sorry you have mistaken me for somebody who thinks like you and I do not. Then you walk away...

Cara (educator), who asks students what other people say about their decision to undertake Indigenous Studies reflects on more subtle, yet ultimately undermining comments:

I've started to talk to students about what people have said to them when they've said they're doing Indigenous studies. It's quite interesting where people are saying - my parents don't know how this is going to help me get a job. Or my friends all laughed at me. My mates think it's just an easy course.

It seems, for some students at least, enrolling in Indigenous Studies opens students up to various forms of ridicule. While it would be easy to suggest that this type of discrimination is only a fraction of what some Indigenous Australians experience, that would overlook a rich vein of teaching opportunities. While these experiences no doubt provide useful examples of experiential learning for the individual students, it is possible they could be harnessed more explicitly in the classroom.

## Chapter 7 Discussion

*I think it's just important to acknowledge that what (the educators) are doing here is bloody amazing and unexpected and it's under the radar and it should not be under the radar (John, learner).*

Almost all the learners who participated in this study had a transformative learning experience to some degree. Transformations occurred for non-Indigenous students, as might be expected, but also for the Indigenous learners, although in different ways. I began the study with a focus on learner resistance to Indigenous Studies course material. However, this focus shifted as the richness of the learner narratives and the educator interviews became more apparent, which is what one might hope as research evolves. A much more nuanced picture of the process of transformation began to emerge during data analysis. Resistant, ignorant, or even racist are common descriptors of learners undertaking Indigenous studies. The hallmarks of these characteristics are often evident in both students' written assessment work (Hollinsworth, 2016a) and their classroom behaviours.

The threshold concepts model of liminality as a rite of passage provides a way of thinking about student learning in Indigenous Studies, which eschews classifying learners as racist or resistant. Not labelling learners in this way subtly shifts the focus from the individual to the behaviour, opening the possibility for transformation rather than suggesting the stasis that a label can imply. As the learners in this study demonstrated, resistant behaviour can result from overt prejudice or from freshly disturbed—sometimes deeply ingrained—beliefs, values, and understandings. Labelling learners as resistant is not necessarily helpful, although it also does not exonerate the learner who exhibits racist behaviour. Rather, avoiding labelling recognises the transformative possibilities inherent in the rite of passage liminal journey that discursive engagement with disciplinary knowledge can provide.

Similarly, the liminality conceptualisation does not necessarily allow learners to avoid the discomfort that might stem from the struggle to grasp the new knowledge, but it does offer a mechanism for supporting the learning during this challenging phase of the rite of passage. As educators note in the literature - and around tearoom tables - students *do* learn,

grow, and change over the course of a period of Indigenous Studies teaching. My study provides a wholistic model for understanding the transformative learning journey which many learners experience, and which recognises the crucial interplay between learner and educator in the context of the cultural interface of the Indigenous Studies classroom.

The conceptualisation of these challenging behaviours alters as liminality folds students into a theoretical framework that simultaneously incorporates both the learner's and the educator's experience. It is a conceptualisation that creates room for learners to grow and develop (however painfully). It enables educators, as hosts of the liminal space, to facilitate the journey and to assist students to manage the confusion generated by troublesome knowledge and by stirring their previously held, if sometimes dormant, tacit knowledge. Supporting learners as they grapple with challenges in Indigenous Studies is familiar terrain for educators. Critically, the notion of liminality, with its explicit recognition of the associated emotional and cognitive challenges for students, generates an opportunity to illuminate the complex array of factors Indigenous Studies educators are likely to be managing in the classroom. Managing emotional responses to the curriculum, such as anger, guilt, and fear, are factors with which most educators of Indigenous Studies will be familiar. Many will have attempted to articulate these challenges amongst their peers, and there are emerging voices in the literature (Gatwiri et al., 2021; S. R. Phillips, 2016) Some brave trailblazers will have attempted to articulate these factors in institutional fora, seeking to draw attention to a largely invisible issue. There is a growing urgency to the need for institutional policy and national action to address the complexities of Indigenous Studies teaching for educators, which I return to below. First, though, I draw together the threads of the liminal journey and consider the study findings from the perspective of learners, beginning with a summary of the elements of the rite of passage.

## **Learning in Indigenous Studies as a Rite of Passage**

The liminal journey begins, as all good journeys and rites of passage do, with a separation from what is known and familiar, accompanied by a consequent shift in status to a less sure, novice-like status. The students in this study all came from home disciplines other than Indigenous Studies, except for Tania, who was enrolled in an Indigenous Studies minor program to complement her professional program. The students were at various

stages of their programs, but due to the data collection schedule none of the learners were in the first semester of their studies (although some were in their first year of study). Unsurprisingly, each learner had their own particular set of prior experiences; Julie, Kelly, and Mark were matured-aged learners, for example, while Amelia, Tania and Jessica were school leavers. A number of students were unsettled by their own tacit knowledge that came to the fore as they undertook their Indigenous Studies learning, including Alice, who reported negative experiences in a workplace cultural awareness workshop. For the learners who participated in this study, their pre-liminal experience was characterised by separation from their home disciplines and some uncertainty as they joined new cohorts of classmates from their own and other study programs. As they entered the liminal phase, learners had a range of emotional and cognitive responses, including fear and anxiety, and a sense of guilt about their lack of knowledge of Indigenous Australian history, although most of the study's learners experienced transformation to some degree.

This apparent existence of tacit knowledge or deeply ingrained prejudicial understandings is a complex conundrum which is complicated for both learners and educators. Tacit knowledge is difficult to observe, and unless we explicitly recognise it or understand its role in learning, it is likely that it will form part of a struggle for both educator and learner, but one which may not be evident to either, resulting in a cycle of resistance and frustration. I suggest that, rather than seeing this as simply resistance to this new way of thinking about the colonial experience or Indigenous matters generally, what we see as negative learner behaviours may be students grappling with their own deeply held but unexamined understandings. This is the counter-intuitive and troublesome knowledge at the heart of the threshold concepts framework. To shift these frames of reference requires time (Carey & Prince, 2015; Sonn, 2008), which will vary from student to student depending on an intricate interplay of tacit knowledge, prior experience, and openness to learning and teaching. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to ascribe specific curriculum content, one suggestion that arises from this study is to work more explicitly to expose these tacit understandings. Eliciting prior learning to facilitate understanding of new material is a common pedagogical device (Gagne, 1985; Miner et al., 2015) which may be useful in Indigenous Studies teaching. More than one of the educators in this study noted that you have to debunk the myths first, and part of the debunking may be to examine the myth itself. In a way, this is counter-intuitive for educators because it may

feel like reinforcing rather than refuting the myth. Nevertheless, starting with the learner's existing understandings has sound pedagogical underpinnings, and in light of this research, makes some sense and may facilitate the transformative learning experience which educators and Elders in this study desire.

This study builds on and contributes to research at the intersection of threshold concepts and Indigenous studies and is located in the broad field of transformative learning. My sociocultural constructivist approach enables consideration of the learners and educators within a wider societal context, in terms of prior experience, future aspirations and professional practice. Nakata's (2007) notion of the cultural interface illuminates the cultural and postcolonial context of the study. I have focused on the liminality aspect of the threshold concepts framework, which Meyer and Land (2003; 2005), in their original threshold concepts work, described as a rite of passage. Hawkins and Edward's (2015) notion of the liminal journey, as well as the earlier anthropological work (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960), has sharpened my thinking about learning in the liminal space.

I conceptualise student learning in Indigenous Studies as a rite of passage or liminal journey with three identifiable, distinct and overlapping stages; preliminal, liminal, and post-liminal (transformative). As outlined in the previous chapters, each phase has its own characteristics and features, with associated learner behaviours. In this chapter, I draw together the three phases of the liminal journey, drawing on both learner and educator findings, to create a model which accounts for the liminal journey. I argue that while the idea of student resistance is evident in the disciplinary literature and that learner transformation is reasonably common in the field of Indigenous Studies (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Bullen & Roberts, 2019c; Castell, et al., 2018), the *process* of the learner shift from the former to the latter is less well-documented. I then outline a set of implications of the findings for learners and educators before proposing a threshold concept which I suggest points to an urgency for a policy agenda which is currently absent. Finally, I contend that the findings of this study presage the need for institutional policy and practice that recognises the challenges of learning and teaching in Indigenous Studies cannot be resolved by individuals alone, or even through disciplinary responses. There is a growing urgency to the need for policy responses to the learner and educator needs

foreshadowed by this study and others, in an area that will grow considerably given the ongoing national focus on Indigenous curriculum.

## **The Journey Begins**

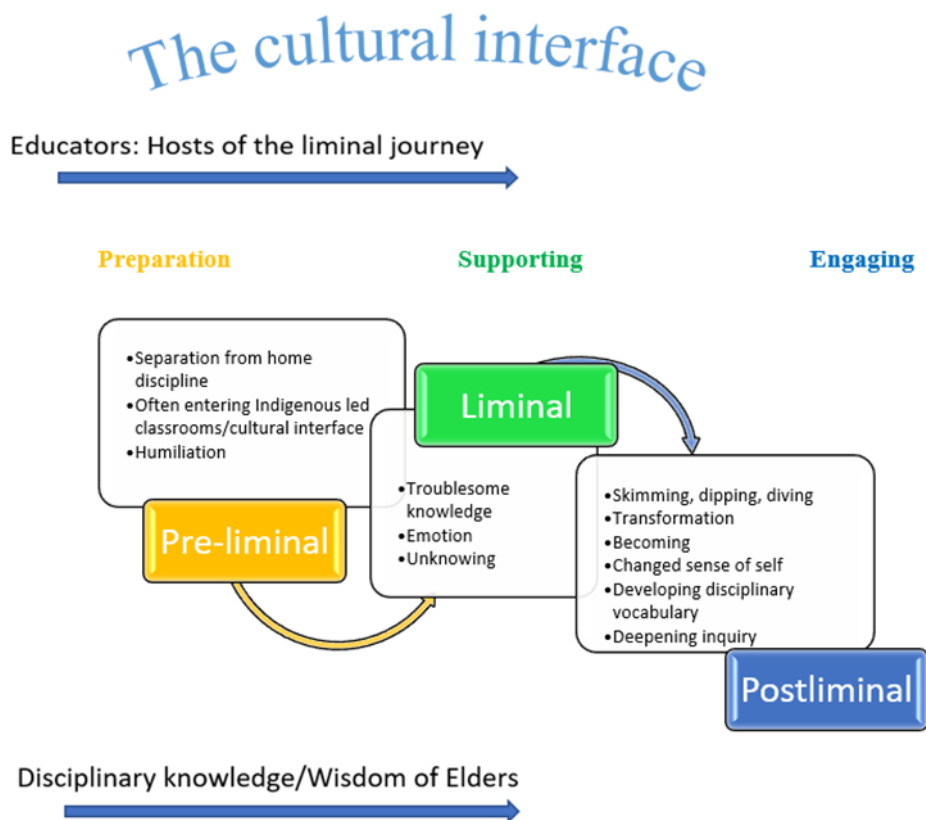
Commonly, when individuals are undertaking the type of activity that results in a rite of passage, they are at least cognisant that they are undertaking something significant. The person getting married is aware that they are going to experience a change – even if they do not know quite what to expect. The novice driver is aware that they are going to learn a new set of skills. They may experience some trepidation about this, and they may be uncertain or under-confident about how they will get from the beginning to being able to drive competently on the road. The understanding of what they are to achieve mitigates the concern about how they are going to get to that point. There are two issues here. First, the learner chooses to learn to drive. There is a recognisable outcome at the end, which many mandated students of Indigenous Studies do not necessarily perceive when they begin their studies. The students have often neither chosen the subject nor have any clear idea of where they are heading to, let alone where they will end up. Conversely, a learner driver has a clear idea of the end point – they will be able to drive, and they will have a licence as certification. For Indigenous Studies learners, their outcomes are likely to be provisional and there are further steps before they will be able to say they are beyond being a novice. Their skills are likely to develop further over the course of their lifetimes.

The findings of this study have led me to reconceptualise students' learning in the discipline of Indigenous Studies as a rite of passage with distinct features of separation, challenge, and transformation. Any rite of passage involves a separation from an original group and a change of status. Often, the passage involves starting out as a novice and encountering humiliation and disorientation before transformation into a new state of knowing and selfhood. When learners are characterised in this way, it is possible to attribute the difficult and apparently ignorant questions that learners ask, to their novice status. Learners may need better preparation for the challenges of the liminal period, and educators require better protection from the inevitable prejudiced discourse that will ensue. Learners might be better prepared for their journeys; for both the experience of humility that comes with being a novice, and for the emotive dimension of learning so often associated with Indigenous Studies learning.

The study findings suggest there is also a significant propensity for learners to experience transformative learning, which reframes their thinking, and in some cases, influences their actions outside of the classroom. There are also implications for educators that arise from the study findings. Figure 3 below encapsulates the major elements of a model which characterises learning and teaching in Indigenous Studies as a rite of passage. The model includes both the learner and the educator experience of the liminal journey and also includes the active teaching elements of preparing, supporting, and engaging, which I suggest assists passage through the liminal space. The learner’s trajectories through the liminal space are described and summarised, as well as the role of educators as hosts of the liminal journey. While the arrow of the educators indicates a forward trajectory, the wavy line of the elements of the rite of passage expresses the different experiences that learners may have of the liminal space as well as the potential for oscillation and movement backwards and forwards in the space. The underpinning wisdom of the Elders and the relevance of disciplinary knowledge, along with the overarching nature of the cultural interface, are captured in the holistic model.

**Figure 3.**

*The Indigenous Studies Liminal Journey*



## **Preliminarity: Preparation for Learning**

This study's findings suggest that learners come to Indigenous Studies classrooms for the first time with a powerful set of pre-conceptions that often operate at the level of a tacit knowledge that is not necessarily well understood by individuals. Learners are sometimes unaware of these understandings until, for example, they begin their studies and explore, in much greater detail than they might previously have done, the violent dispossession of a sovereign people from their lands. It may be the first time learners find themselves in a classroom with an Indigenous Australian educator and/or classmates. The tacit knowledge is the degree to which learners might have taken the story of a much gentler 'settlement' to heart, subsequently embedded through sociocultural experiences. Kelly, for example, was deeply shocked that she had not been aware of the poor treatment of Aboriginal people since colonisation. Our overall national myths as well as the Australian school system and curriculum reinforce and normalise this gentler narrative or overlook it altogether, as Jessica and Amelia suggested. There is, of course, likely to be variation in learner beginning experiences. There will be learners who are likely to be more overtly uncertain, prejudiced, or racist, as some of the students in this study were as they began their studies. Amelia, by her own admission, began her Indigenous Studies learning sullen and resistant. For other students, like Kelly or Melissa, for example, the sense of shock at not knowing about colonial violence was a partial explanation for an unexamined ignorance of something not apparent to them, or at least not examined. Julie and Alice had previously had negative experiences at single-episode cultural sensitivity training they had attended in their workplaces, which had made them wary of their Indigenous Studies course as they began their learning.

The educators in this study took particular care in welcoming their learners into the classrooms, but also in signalling that those learners were now in an Indigenous space. Mary played music, others constructed activities to learn more about their students (Mary and Jane), perhaps delving into the students' tacit understandings. One educator, Cara, unsettled her students with the activity of removing the students from their seats and shifting their things around, but also took care to support that activity with careful explanation. Cara reports that student feedback from the activity often indicates that it is challenging but that it also facilitates learning. The 'aha' moment of understanding is that no-one chooses to be dispossessed of their land; or that, in positions where an authority

figure tells you what to do, your agency diminishes. If we consider that these early classes are the beginning not just of a learning journey but of a rite of passage with its accompanying separation, change of status, and humility, we begin to think about teaching that facilitates that process, prepares students for the ‘ordeal’ and demonstrates that it is a trajectory. The notion of ordeal is consistent with the now almost universal notion of the hero’s journey (Campbell, 2008), in which there are common elements of separation, ordeal, threshold crossing, and transformation before eventual reintegration into society.

Our orientation to the subject could explicitly address the way in which the subject, its educators, and the learning may be different from what learners have experienced previously. We might also explain more clearly their new status as Indigenous Studies students or as “novitiates in the field of inquiry” (Nakata et al., 2014, p. 10). For many university learners taking Indigenous Studies subjects, they will already have done some other studies and will have some sense of their own mastery of their discipline, which will likely be a discipline they have chosen. For most of the cohort of learners in this study, the Indigenous studies subject they were studying was not one they had chosen. The lack of choice makes it even more important that learners understand the challenges of entering and progressing through the passage. They also need to understand how the subject relates to the major sequence they are studying because that is likely to be where their focus resides and this may be a way to engage the learner. To a learner, the end of their degree is, to a large extent, a known quantity. There is a particular profession, or at least a likely field of endeavour. For learners enrolled in degrees leading to professional qualifications, like the participants in this study, they have at least an imagined idea of what they will become, whether a teacher, social worker, or lawyer, when they complete their degree. One of the many challenges for Indigenous Studies educators will be clarifying relevance and countering the fear and trepidation expressed, for example, by students like Alice or Julie; or the resistance to the perception of ‘brain washing’ that Amelia harboured.

### **Liminality: Supporting Learners Through the Period of Challenge**

As we have seen from the data presented here and from the earlier cited literature, many students learning in Indigenous Studies will experience feelings of guilt, shock,

responsibility, helplessness, or anger. Those feelings are in response to the course content, particularly the notion of colonial violence, but those emotions are also intertwined with other life experiences. For one of the learner participants in this study (John), for example, the course material triggered feelings associated with a relationship breakdown and the subsequent disruption to their relationship with a child. These are relatively complex interplays of curriculum and life events that may potentially occur in other subjects in which learners are studying. However, we can be almost assured that at least some learners in an Indigenous Studies class will experience cognitive and emotive challenge, whether they have other significant life events occurring concurrently or in their past, or not. Most of the learners in this study spoke of some level of emotional challenge, from fear and anxiety to uncertainty and anger. This likelihood of emotional challenge for learners suggests that it is important for educators to incorporate preparation of learners for this into their practice.

Some of the educators in this study prepared their learners for some of the difficulties they were likely to encounter. Wendy did tutorial activities to help students think through how they might respond to racist comments from family members and friends, for example. Some of the learners in the study, such as Kelly and Amelia, indicated that they had indeed had difficult conversations with friends, family members and other members of their communities. It is not just these conversations, though, that are important. It is the affective aspects of the learning, so clearly expressed by students in this study, that are critical and for which both learners and educators are least prepared. This is not just a matter, for example, of teaching individuals about their white privilege or showing how white fragility works, but it is recognising that the learning of both these very tricky concepts takes time, and emotional investment, to grasp and master. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore it in depth, there are clear curriculum implications for the management of liminality.

### **Postliminality: Engaging the Transformed Learner**

The students who may be racist or resistant are never the only ‘type’ of student in an Indigenous Studies classroom. There were students like Jessica, for example, who were more familiar with Aboriginal people. How do we continue to engage students who have made significant transformative journeys? For Amelia and Kelly, their thinking about

Indigenous peoples and their own understandings of themselves had shifted dramatically. For them, their new learning had irrevocably slipped into their lives outside of their studies and had become an irreversible part of their thinking. Thorpe (2017), in her work with students in pre-service teacher education programs, found those students who were deeply engaged during their undergraduate studies were eager to continue to contribute but were unsure of how to do this. The unanswered question here is how long the transformation lasts. While it is an interesting area for further study, it makes sense that showing students possibilities for the future is likely to cement their transformative trajectories. If we consider Amelia, for example, who had made an enormous transformative shift, she was equivocal about how she would use this newfound knowledge and particularly how she might use it in her professional life. Mark and John, who were completing professional majors, had clearer ideas about how they would take their Indigenous Studies learning into their professional studies, as were Julie and Alice. While the educator drive for students to do Indigenous Studies is to make a difference to the lives of Indigenous Australians, and in doing so, to build a better nation, it is not always clear to students how this might occur. In Indigenous Studies and other disciplines, we will need to consider how to galvanise the enthusiasm of such learners in ways that promote ongoing engagement.

## **Returning to the Threshold Concepts Framework**

In the previous three chapters, I narrowed my focus to the liminality aspect of the threshold concepts framework, which Meyer and Land (2003; 2005) originally likened to a rite of passage (Turner, 1969). I now return to the broader threshold concepts framework as a reminder of how liminality is situated within the framework. The threshold concepts framework is a transformative learning theory that has an emphasis on challenging learning or troublesome knowledge. Threshold concepts have been described as the “jewels in the crown of the curriculum, which students need to comprehend to have mastery of a subject area” (Land et al., 2006, p. 198). These jewels are not factual knowledge such as dates or formulas, but rather are “building blocks that progress understanding of the subject” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.6), like gravity, for example, or precedence. For a student to understand the next level of concept, they must understand gravity first. A threshold concept has multiple features. These are troublesomeness, discursive, bounded, integrative, reconstitutive, transformative, and irreversible.

Troublesome knowledge is knowledge that can cause learners to struggle, cognitively and emotionally, and sometimes leads to behaviours like mimicry or regurgitation (Cousin, 2006). Other learner behaviours can include silence, or argumentativeness. The emotive struggle is challenging for learners who are not aware of the potential for this type of experience. Learners who do not understand the threshold concepts associated with a particular field can sometimes complete a course of disciplinary study but might never fully grasp the subject and will likely be poor discipline experts who potentially have difficulty applying such knowledge in practice (Meyer & Land, 2005). The social justice implications of the widespread failure of learners to grasp disciplinary knowledge in Indigenous Studies are substantial if we accept that graduates who have a greater capacity to work effectively with Indigenous Australians can improve socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous peoples and communities (Behrendt et al., 2012).

### **Colonial Violence: An Indigenous Studies Threshold Concept**

I initially set out to explore the possibility that there were threshold concepts in the Indigenous Studies disciplinary curriculum, encouraged by Meyer and Land's (2003; 2005) suggestion that there were likely to be threshold concepts in all disciplines. Given my understanding of the notion of liminality and troublesomeness (Perkins, 2006; 2008) from my reading of the threshold concepts literature, I also wondered if the associated notion of challenge, coupled with mastery of disciplinary threshold concepts, might account for the 'student resistance' so familiar in the Indigenous Studies pedagogical literature. It is these resistant learners who can generate emotion, for themselves and their educators, but are not necessarily representative of the diversity of learner experiences. As we know by now, my study took a divergent turn resulting from both a lack of clear evidence of distinct threshold concepts and an emerging pattern in my learner participant data, specifically in relation to liminality. While I am convinced of the pedagogical value of this sharper focus on liminality, I want to return now to the idea of threshold concepts. While the threshold concepts field has grown considerably since the early postulation by Meyer and Land, there is little specific work in the Indigenous Studies discipline.

Kamilaroi scholar Moodie (2019), arguing from reflexive practice, suggests a number of threshold concepts in Indigenous Studies, including race, Country, policy, and relationality, while noting that further empirical work is needed to ensure the "validity of

the concepts proposed” (p. 746). The case Moodie makes is convincing from an educator and theoretical perspective, yet the learner participants in my study were not so clear in their articulations of what they found most challenging in their studies or what shifted their perception. This ambiguity in learner accounts is not necessarily surprising given the discursive mode of inquiry used to collect data for this study, which tends to elicit wide-ranging responses, unlike the carefully curated answers of a written assessment task, for example. Further research would be needed to be confident in these concepts as threshold concepts.

Māori (Ngāti Ranginui) scholar Hall and colleagues (2017) suggest that Māori Studies in Aotearoa<sup>20</sup> New Zealand is likely to be the site of multiple threshold concepts given that, in the discipline, many learners experience the cognitive and affective shifts associated with the threshold concepts framework (Meyer & Land, 2003). While the authors suggest that further research would be needed to identify the concepts, they also raise a critical question regarding the possibility of different threshold concepts for Māori and non-Māori learners given the “cultural and often deeply personal nature of the subject matter” (p. 102). The case for different threshold concepts for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners is less clear from my study, given the small total cohort and the even smaller Indigenous cohort (2 Indigenous students). However, Mark, the mature-aged Aboriginal learner from this study, did experience an emotional and cognitive response to colonial violence (in particular the idea of the Stolen Generations) with a subsequent shift in understanding of his grandmother’s tendency to hide the small children when strangers arrived.

Notwithstanding this lack of learner clarity, I suggest tentatively, though conversely, with some confidence, that colonial violence is a threshold concept in Indigenous Studies. The learner responses particularly coalesce around the idea of a growing awareness and understanding of colonial violence, opening up new avenues of understanding coupled with a greater willingness to consider Indigenous perspectives. I considered the possibility of colonialism as the threshold concept. However, colonialism encompasses a number of major ideas, such as the abuse of power, legal issues around possession of land, and economic exploitation. For the group of learners who participated in this study, it is

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<sup>20</sup> Aotearoa is Māori term for the country known as New Zealand.

the violence of the colonialism that seems to have been the catalyst for new understandings, as well as the source of emotional and cognitive challenge. Below, I set out my case.

It is timely to recall that a threshold concept has several criteria, including liminality and the associated troublesomeness and transformativeness (Meyer & Land, 2003), which I have described in detail in the preceding findings chapters. As well, a threshold concept is said to be discursive, integrative, and reconstitutive but also irreversible and bounded (Baillie et al., 2013; Nicola-Richmond et al., 2018). Threshold concepts are often, though not always, listed in the original order<sup>21</sup> (see, for example, Morgan, 2012; Scheja & Pettersson, 2010), it seems to me that there is some logical, if fluid, sequence. Troublesomeness and liminality characterise the early part of the learning experience in relation to a threshold concept. For learners in this study, there were both implicit and explicit responses suggestive of colonial violence. For example, John's response to a visit to a notorious children's home where Aboriginal children who had been separated from their families were incarcerated:

when we went to the [children's home, name removed] place recently. ...I am not even remotely putting myself in a position of the horror that I've since learnt about. But for some reason, we talk about certain things, and we go to certain places, like [children's home] and there's a whole flood of memory that comes back and I find that really challenging.

John explicitly connects *the horror* of the violence inflicted in the institution to a challenge to his learning. However, as discussed earlier in the chapter on liminality, the phenomenon of unknowing is also instructive here. Learners spoke clearly of a not knowing, which can be troubling, as Alice indicates:

I think the challenging thing is, for me personally, is just probably the lack of knowledge that I have around all of this. It's not that there is some guilt involved

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<sup>21</sup> transformative;(2) irreversible;(3) integrative;(4) bounded; and (5) troublesome (Meyer & Land, 2006)

in that, but it's - how have we got to this point where - how have I got to this point where I know so little?

*All of this* becomes a euphemism for something that is *guilt* inducing and is leading to some 'soul searching' as to how that might have occurred. The source of that guilt is the colonial violence that has been the source of a great silence. However, what we also see here is fledgling evidence of discursive shifts and some evidence of reconstitution. Initially, Alice asks metaphorically how *we got here*, yet the pause and correction to *how have I got to this point* is instructive. Reconstitution relates to the alterations in learner subjectivity or shift in identity (Nicola-Richmond et al., 2018). What the correction from *we* to *I* suggests is not a personal responsibility for the colonial violence, although the mention of guilt also suggests some wrestling with this idea, but a renewed sense that Alice should have been more cognisant of colonial violence. There is an implication that Alice understands Indigenous matters are something she can no longer ignore. It is likely that this shift in understanding will open up new ways of seeing Indigenous Studies and ideally permeate her professional practice.

There is ample evidence of transformed thinking, which suggests progress towards mastery of disciplinary ways of thinking and practicing, as outlined in the chapter 6. All of the learners experienced some change in their way of thinking and speaking about Indigenous Studies, and in some cases, learners experienced quite profound learning which changed the way they saw the world around them. Amelia, for example, saw the customary proprietorial practice of bag checking at her part-time job in a new light after studying Indigenous Studies. A practice that she had previously taken for granted - bag checking Indigenous customers particularly and not for non-Indigenous customers - became imbued with racism, and power imbalance. Exercising her own agency to bag check for all customers, in a situation which now cast her as sympathetic to Indigenous customers, no doubt added to her practical understanding of the meaning of casual and everyday racism.

The irreversibility criteria of a threshold concept is difficult to ascertain with any certainty without some longitudinal element in a study, which was beyond the scope of this PhD project. However, there is reasonably strong evidence of change in learner understandings that is unlikely to reverse. John and Mark, who both came from the same disciplinary

major, for example, were already beginning to consider the practices of their discipline in relation to Indigenous peoples. Exemplifying critical thinking, John questioned the role of disciplinary pioneers who had commandeered Indigenous Knowledges as their own. While this new thinking may not regress, there is a limit, or boundedness, to any threshold concept, and it is likely that this is the case for colonial violence. Rethinking the gentle settlement of a sovereign space in light of disciplinary teaching does not mean that learners will not engage in further cycles of challenge and illumination, running the risk of getting ‘stuck’ on other major disciplinary concepts such as racism or struggling to understand Indigenous notions of Country or relationality.

### **Hosts of the Liminal Journey: Implications of the Study Findings for Educators**

Considering the learning in Indigenous Studies across a semester as a rite of passage may be a fruitful way to consider how to respond to the challenges identified here for educators and learners. There is likely also an opportunity to develop stronger ways to continue to engage learners who do have transformative learning experiences. The learner behaviours and difficult questions may indeed be able to be characterised as white fragility (for the largely non-Indigenous students), but in terms of teaching, the label does not necessarily help us to manage the behaviour or to take up the teaching moment. It sets up an ‘us and them’ situation which tends to put educators themselves on the defensive. If we consider this learning to be more of a rite of passage, we would then expect to see more of this behaviour in the early parts of the subject teaching. Several of the educators in this study talked about active ways of managing those questions and how the questions change, suggesting that they did indeed expect such questions. In fact, these experienced educators were alert to the rhythm of a classroom and to the changes in student questions—discursiveness—that signalled either stuckness (Goebel & Maistry, 2020; Lather, 1998) or shifting frames of reference (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005; Mezirow, 1991).

If colonial violence is a threshold concept, as I have suggested here, there are significant ramifications for educators as well as students. The threshold concepts framework is a useful vehicle to consider the educator aspects of these findings. There are two key issues here: developing a curriculum that accounts for the potential for a range of emotional

responses from students; managing those emotions—particularly the stronger emotions or the aggressive responses; and managing the educator’s own emotions. One of the educators in this study, Cara, talked about the *ripping off of the scab of colonisation*. This is a strong metaphor which hints at the depth of the feeling that is not necessarily evident on the surface of this confident, competent, and creative educator. Jane was distressed that she had not given her Indigenous Studies class a warning before she showed a video that involved the topic of suicide. This is not simply about the logistics of being prepared for teaching. The first example suggests what is likely to be the case for many Indigenous academics; which is that they will have their own story, and inevitably, there will be trigger points for them as educators (Brookfield, 1989).

It will be difficult for educators to be focused on managing learners’ affective behaviour so that there are ultimately positive learning outcomes, if they are struggling with their own emotional responses. This is different from allowing learners to see your emotions in response to a topic in the curriculum. Wiping away tears at the end of a talk from an Elder from the Stolen Generation is an expected response (my own experience). A response like that may capture what some learners are feeling. Being able to recover from that feeling, though is critical to being able to ‘hold’ students through their feelings (Sjoberg & McDermott, 2016). What are the potential learning outcomes that students can have once they have ‘sat with’ those feelings a little? To manage this teaching context, educators themselves need to be critically reflective practitioners who are aware of their own trigger points. There is little in our preparation as teaching academics that would assist staff in this specific part of their teaching.

As noted earlier, students may exhibit a range of behaviours from the obvious distress of crying—Mary, an experienced educator from this study, notes that she has ways of managing tears (tea and tissues) and that a teary learner is a common part of her teaching experience. Those of us with a little empathy (and some practice) can probably manage a straightforward bout of tears. An expert educator like Mary was able to turn it into a ‘teaching moment’. Indeed, she recognised the opportunity for what it was—an extension of her teaching. Inexperienced or junior educators, or tutors, may be more vulnerable to student emotions. Dealing with a racist or aggressive student is another aspect of teaching that is perhaps more difficult to manage and not necessarily within the common set of

educator skills. There are subtle differences between what might also be perceived as racist. Over time, and through trial and error (or assistance from colleagues), more experienced educators are more likely to have developed ways to manage these situations. That some educators learn skills over time in no way mitigates institutional responsibility for appropriate preparation and protection of educators in this growing area of practice.

### **Safe Classrooms?**

One educator-led apparent antidote to some of the challenges of managing the resistance and racism in learners is the idea of establishing safe classrooms. We set up the notion of safe spaces in classrooms on the understanding that it is both learners and educators who need to be safe. What is less explicit is that those two safeties are quite different. Safety for an Indigenous student might also be very different from safety for a non-Indigenous student. Learners need to feel safe enough to ask difficult questions or even questions that they do not realise might be offensive to an Indigenous educator or classmate. The responses from learners in this study suggest that many students have an idea that there are some questions that might be interpreted as racist or inappropriate, but the desire to know the answer sometimes overrides the inhibition to ask. One learner, Julie, even noted that she was prepared to say something that might offend the educator leading her class—suggesting that learners see the educator as having to cope with that as part of their role. Julie was more circumspect about offending a classmate who she presumably considered had not chosen to put themselves in the line of that particular fire. So, learners need to be safe not only in relation to the educators but also in relation to their classmates, which is in some ways at odds with learning and certainly requires a skilled practitioner to manage the dynamic environment of the classroom. Inquiry, after all, is one of the cornerstones of learning.

The safety of the educator is different. If we want students to learn, the threshold concepts framework would suggest that the discursive element of teaching is critical. That means that, in any given classroom interaction, an educator may potentially have to manage a racist question or dialogue. The safety here perhaps, is for the educator to be confident that they can manage whatever situation arises. Sjöberg and McDermott (2016) developed very carefully structured ways to manage classroom questions after fielding a learner question which asked (in relation to Indigenous Australians), about just shooting them all.

Clearly, this is a question that might be difficult to manage in any context, but in a racially charged environment (2016), responding requires a very sophisticated understanding of discipline, student learning, and one's own emotions to manage effectively. Careful management of the discursive elements of the classroom can be one way to avoid being caught on the spot and might be part of a repertoire of techniques new educators and educators new to Indigenous Studies can be taught through professional development.

An additional aspect of educator safety might be the follow-up support that is available to staff in the event of an incident like the one described above. Challenges for educators also happen outside of the classroom context. Wakka Wakka and Gooreng Gooreng scholar S.R. Phillips (2016) details the risks for educators, particularly junior female Indigenous educators, in an activity as professionally taken-for-granted as examining student feedback responses. Learners emboldened by anonymity and who are yet to experience the transformative learning that might preclude the documenting of racist or prejudiced ideas, are familiar to Indigenous academics. Having a trusted colleague read the comments first (S.R. Phillips, 2016) may be helpful, but it only addresses the issue at an individual level. It is a sad indictment on institutions when Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) educators must cope with the difficulty of this teaching on their own, with little recognition in the formal processes of universities.

### **Acknowledging the Effects of Repetition: Groundhog Day<sup>22</sup> 'Syndrome'**

A further issue for teachers is that they not only deal with this teaching once—this is the Groundhog Day syndrome. Each time a new group of students comes along, similar patterns are likely to ensue. For the learners, their Indigenous Studies learning will be a new experience, in which they are beginning learners, but for the educators, they often become repeat hosts of the liminal journey. Unless it is an educator's first time teaching the discipline, they will likely have done this at least once a year, if not more (for example, increased utilisation of summer, winter, or third semester programs can mean that some offerings are repeated). The cumulative and corrosive effect of this should not be

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<sup>22</sup> Groundhog Day has become a means of expressing endless repetition of an event or activity. The 1993 US Movie entitled Groundhog Day featured a character who lived the same day over and over.

underestimated, and ideally, would be factored into both the professional development of new teachers but also the ongoing support and work planning for Indigenous teachers. As White, (2000, p.105, cited in Thunig & Jones, 2021, p. 413) says:

This all comes with a great personal and collective cost. For example, each time you give a lecture, it's like you are telling your own story over and over. Daily struggles take their toll. For some it can be too much to cope with, and the result is often burn-out or drop-out.

For earlier career teachers, particularly those who might have had a negative experience the first time they taught, or at a subsequent time, the risk that they will be unsettled is significant. It is possible that they may not ask for help, or not know where to seek assistance when it is needed. Given the shortage of new teachers, this is not a very sensible risk to take. It does not make good business sense to wear out our new teachers. It may be possible to argue that this is what happens with all new teachers, and to some extent that is likely to be true. However, for Indigenous teachers and teachers of Indigenous curriculum, that is an additional risk which requires consideration by institutional authorities responsible for education and academic quality.

We should not assume that these Indigenous staff, particularly junior or inexperienced staff, are experts at *teaching* their discipline, as opposed to being discipline experts. There is a particular need for ongoing, structured professional development for beginning Indigenous teachers. The professional development might include how to manage emotions, when to refer to other sources or services, and how to hold students as passengers on the liminal journey. The development could also include how to manage difficult questions in the classroom, what techniques can be used, and what principles we might be using.

Formal structures which recognise the complexity of this work are required, or it is likely that there will be many practitioners, like those described above, who could fall through the institutional cracks, with quality educators deterred from teaching or developing in the discipline. Indigenous educators sometimes have Indigenous colleagues within their workplaces whom they can turn to for debriefing after this type of event, or with whom they can discuss practice difficulties. While my primary focus here is on Indigenous

Australian educators, non-Indigenous educators are also under pressure to Indigenise their curricula. Non-Indigenous teachers who are attempting to teach this material for the first time will likely have far less support from colleagues able to offer targeted, expert advice. In addition, the lack of Indigenous expertise in the disciplines may isolate the early adopters of Indigenised curriculum.

## **Formal mechanisms for Professional Development for Indigenous Studies Teaching**

Through the thesis to this point, I have outlined a framework for understanding transformative learning in Indigenous Studies as a liminal journey, which draws upon findings from learners and teachers of Indigenous Studies. I have shown the challenge of the liminal journey for both students and teachers in this critical area of tertiary study. At present, many universities are struggling to meet the demands of their own peak body, through the *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020* (Universities Australia, 2017) and the recently released *Indigenous Strategy 2022-25* (Universities Australia, 2022), to ensure that all graduates engage with Indigenous curriculum. The findings explored in this study suggest that opportunities and challenges exist for institutions seeking to meet the demands or intent of the Strategy, but it is an area where there are neither enough Indigenous staff nor the leadership structures to fully realise the stated goal. Typically, when universities wish to drive a strategic agenda, funds follow. This has not generally been the case for the mooted Indigenisation of the curriculum.

The implications of this study, noted above, suggest that educators may need better preparation and support to be successful in this challenging disciplinary context. This preparation is not something that can be resolved by individual educators. Rather, it needs to be part of an institutional and I would argue, national, suite of initiatives. As outlined, teaching can be emotionally and cognitively challenging for educators as well as learners. As students grapple with troublesome knowledge, they may need to have things explained multiple times. They may ask questions, that on face value, seem offensive. The questions seem offensive to the educator partly because the teacher is the discipline expert and sees the question in very different ways to how the learners see it. Some of the educators in the study talked about managing students' emotions. Many educators may have done little professional development for teaching, and the most common professional development

for higher education teaching in Australia is usually a short course (Wood et al., 2011). Such courses are commonly generic in nature and cover the major topics of curriculum design, for example, and ideas like constructive alignment, assessment and feedback, and reflective practice (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

In light of this limited opportunity and the general nature of higher education learning and teaching programs, it is unsurprising that educators may not have had any preparation for managing either students' emotions or their apparent racism. I propose more discipline-focused and potentially ongoing professional development, not because educators are inadequate, or because learners are unmanageable, but to recognise the genuine reality of classroom practice (S.R. Phillips, 2016). Moreover, we know little about the link between attrition rates and stress caused by this kind of teaching, although the literature is clear that it is indeed a source of stress (Asmar & Page, 2009; Jackson et al., 2013; Thunig & Jones, 2021). International literature indicates additional issues exist in terms of entrenching inequity of tenure and promotion, where there is not appropriate teaching professional development for Indigenous educators (Brodt et al., 2019); and that Indigenous focused professional development for non-Indigenous educators can shift their prejudices and widen their view of disciplinary knowledge (Chinn, 2007).

### **Institutional Support of Educators and Teaching**

One response to the findings of this study could be the implementation of enhanced preparation of educators teaching Indigenous Studies. Given that my area of professional practice is focused on professional development for educators of Indigenous Studies, I will take the opportunity afforded by this study and the writing of the thesis to discuss professional development for educators who play such a critical role in learner development as the hosts of the liminal journey. The study findings in relation to student challenges and educator responses are strongly indicative of a compelling need for more focused professional development in this area. In Australia, there are few opportunities for formal professional development, although one university offers a nationally available short course related to Indigenous Perspectives in Learning and Teaching.<sup>23</sup> However,

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<sup>23</sup> Queensland University of Technology in collaboration with Advance HE Higher Education Academy.

most universities already have formal professional development programs for academic staff, commonly offered through their institutional learning and teaching centres.

A number of universities also offer Graduate Certificates in Higher Education, which were first introduced in Australia in the late 1970's (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). However, a brief examination of university websites suggests these programs do not usually include Indigenous teaching as a topic. There are two reasons this might be the case. The learning and teaching professional development centres that offer these programs still do not (typically) employ Indigenous staff (with notable exceptions) who might be able to take responsibility for developing the curriculum for such programs. This is a paradoxical situation. It is going to be difficult to upskill the largely non-Indigenous existing academic development staff without having Indigenous staff who are experts in the area to lead the development. Unfortunately, there are not enough Indigenous educators across the Australian higher education sector to meet this demand. Where there are Indigenous experts, they are commonly deployed to teach Indigenous Studies programs in the disciplines rather than in the learning and teaching professional development centres. This lack of Indigenous expert academic developers has also been evident in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hall, 2011).

Momentum in this area might require two concurrent strategies; firstly, to do targeted and consistent professional development with existing learning and teaching centre staff. Some of this work might include co-development of curriculum for the institutional professional development program, including the re-development of curriculum in the Graduate Certificates in Higher Education Learning and Teaching. Non-Indigenous staff are likely to need support to manage the challenging behaviours of students, who may themselves be experiencing disorientation, confusion, and guilt as they learn. These staff are often the passionate allies of Indigenous academics and community members and may have research links or perhaps discipline expertise in the area of Indigenous Studies, but may be ill-prepared for the negative responses from even a small number of students. Hall (2011), in a rich, small-scale qualitative study, found that non-Indigenous staff who received some preparation for Indigenous curriculum work were more confident in undertaking the work. These programs would become one of the foci of institutional skills

development. Second, there could be co-development of Indigenous Studies-related professional development for all academic staff.

## Considerations at the National Level

National recognition for teaching excellence in Australia occurs through the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) and provides an opportunity for rewarding excellence. More specifically, recognition of Indigenous teaching excellence comes through the Neville Bonner Award<sup>24</sup> for Indigenous Education. As well, the professionalisation of university teaching through formalised qualifications has long been an ongoing national discussion (James, et al., 2015). A number of Australian universities are working in collaboration with the United Kingdom-based Advance HE<sup>25</sup> to progress the professional development of their academic and professional staff workforce through their Fellowships program, which provides formal learning and teaching accreditation. The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia also offers professional development for educators through a fellowship scheme<sup>26</sup>. One Australian university offers a beginning-level, Associate Fellowship program, in collaboration with Advance HE, related to Indigenous Perspectives in Learning and Teaching. In New Zealand, Ako Aotearoa<sup>27</sup> is a formal body which builds capacity and professionalism for tertiary educators. There is considerable scope in Australia for addressing the kinds of issues raised by my study in relation to the professional development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators — issues that have languished for too long, unrecognised and unattended, for individual educators and their learners.

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<sup>24</sup> In 2002, the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education was introduced as part of the Teaching Excellence Awards. Neville Bonner AO (1922-1999) was the first Indigenous Australian to sit in Parliament, and an Elder of the Jagera people. He was almost unique in being an Indigenous activist and a political conservatist. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2021-AAUT-Indigenous-Final-30April.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/fellowship/fellowship> for further detail.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.herdsa.org.au/joining-herdsa-fellowship-community> for further detail.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://ako.ac.nz/> for further detail.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

For this study I set out to discover if there were threshold concepts evident in Australian Indigenous Studies teaching and learning. In a curriculum studded with big ideas – racism, privilege, and dispossession – I was taken by the idea that there might be concepts, including some of those just mentioned, that might be particularly challenging for learners. I chose theory and methods which made sense for the questions I was interested in exploring but that also reflected my learner-focused professional philosophy. The resistant student punctuated the Indigenous Studies teaching and learning literature (Hollinsworth, 2016a; D.J.M. Phillips, 2011) and was a feature of many a collegial discussion. Labels for such behaviour, such as white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) were beginning to proliferate and gain currency alongside earlier notions such as educational spaces characterised as the whitestream (Brookfield, 2007) or the curriculum as a white masterscript (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The possibility of the racist or resistant learner having a transformative learning experience was also a feature of the literature, particularly in Australia (Hollinsworth, 2016). My interest in exploring the learner experience of resistance and transformation coalesced into a more nuanced study following a timely introduction to the threshold concepts framework at a professional development seminar.

The threshold concepts framework had captured my imagination. It led me back to my own undergraduate experience in which I had struggled in first year sociology with notions of power, class, and even gender, which I had not had to really think about as a twenty-something a few years out of nursing school. I recalled both the struggle to comprehend the dense theory but also the wonder of transformed understandings and applying those ideas to the world beyond the classroom. The troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999; 2006) and associated notion of liminality (Meyer & Land, 2003) of the threshold concepts framework was intriguing, making me wonder whether it would have application in my Indigenous Studies teaching where I saw too many students minimally engaged and wanting to ‘get through’ rather understand. With an approach that is both teacher- and student-focused (Cousin, 2006) and centred in disciplinary practice (Meyer & Land, 2005), the threshold concepts framework seemed an ideal methodology to explore the particular concerns I had as a teacher of Indigenous Studies with a student-centred approach to my practice. In addition, the idea that students might encounter

troublesome knowledge that had both cognitive and affective ramifications (Cousin, 2006) for learners made the threshold concepts framework a particularly good fit for the research. As the project developed, driven inductively, particularly by analysis of learner interview data, the study focused more closely on the notion of liminality, originally described by Meyer and Land's (2003; 2005) invoking of the anthropological idea of rites of passage. This was a shift in the focus of the study, although not a complete departure from my original intent of better understanding the learner experience of challenges in Indigenous Studies as well as the desire to identify threshold concepts.

This final chapter illustrates my original contribution to the field, outlining the significance, benefits and implications of the study, as well as describing a set of limitations of the study which coalesce into potential future research pathways.

### **My Original Contribution to Knowledge**

A foundational assumption of this research is that while learners may enter their Indigenous Studies classrooms as resistant, uncertain, and with conscious or unconscious prejudices, transformational learning during a course of study is possible. Focusing on the threshold concepts notion of liminality, I have argued that the process of this transformation is like a rite of passage, whereby learners separate from the familiarity of their home disciplines to enter the culturally dissonant Indigenous Studies classroom space. Students, as agents of their own learning, have the potential to experience transformative reorientations not just in the way they understand their discipline but also how they see the world and behave in their lives. Rather than pigeonholing learners as racist or resistant, the findings of this research demonstrate that in particular learning environments even the most resistant students can have transformative learning experiences, and that those shifts in thinking extend far beyond the classroom. Moreover, those transformations seem irreversible, meeting a key criterion of the TC framework.

Using the theory of the rites of passage, I present a wholistic, progression-based model for understanding this transformation. The model accounts for the role of deep-seated, potentially tacit prejudices and misunderstandings on the part of the learner, and the associated challenge that troublesome knowledge in the discipline exposes. The model also incorporates the critical role of the educators while illuminating the importance and

risks of story in catalysing this transformation. Finally, I suggest that colonial violence is a threshold concept in Indigenous Studies, one which has a challenging but vital role in transforming learner understandings of both Indigenous Australians and themselves.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this research suggest that learners in this study came to their Indigenous Studies classrooms with an anomalous combination of preconceived ideas and apparent gaps in their understandings of Aboriginal Australia. Reinforcing this idea were educator contributions which similarly indicated that students can exhibit behaviours that appear to be resistance to learning about Indigenous matters, such as silence, anger, and the use of offending language, as well as emotions such as guilt, and a sense of loss. While not all learners commented on an emotional response to the curriculum, enough students did to suggest that this is an issue which could be taken up more explicitly in curriculum with explicit support for the phased learning trajectory.

What my study also demonstrates is that the range of learner behaviours we see in the classroom is not static. Behaviours are open to change, which effective teaching can shift. Critically, this shift in thinking occurs over time which is not necessarily surprising. Learners experience the disorientation that accompanies the preliminal phase, as neophyte Indigenous Studies students enter learning spaces that centre Indigeneity and often have Indigenous teachers; experiences they will rarely have had in their previous experience of university study. Considering learning as a rite of passage suggests an alternative to early labelling of students as resistant, racist or ‘fragile’ which may not be helpful for either learner or educator.

Given the current policy emphasis on Indigenising curriculum, there is a pressing need for a co-ordinated response to the needs of both learners and educators in the field of Indigenous Studies. Alongside the policy drive for Indigenous curriculum, there needs to be policy to support not just the staffing of this teaching but also support for educator practice, through dedicated teaching development programs. The teaching model for Indigenous Studies teaching requires change to explicitly account for the emotional labour that is required of Indigenous teachers, particularly junior teachers. Teaching of this nature requires experience, with better professional development for inexperienced

educators. University Higher Education Learning and Teaching programs (including graduate certificates which are now common) could explicitly include Indigenous teaching and learning in their curricula to support the development of Indigenous Studies teachers. Finally, it is possible that a national framework for professional accreditation of Indigenous teaching could address the issues raised by the study.

## **Benefits of the Research**

This study straddles the fields of learning and teaching, and Indigenous Studies, and strays into the area of academic development and higher education policy. While the thesis makes clear the centrality of the Indigenous Studies context, locating the study in the wider field of higher education learning and teaching was also critical. The current policy emphasis in Australia (Universities Australia, 2017; 2022), but also in other colonised nations, on the teaching of Indigenous Studies, and embedding Indigenous content in disciplinary curricula, means that more Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators will be teaching Indigenous curriculum, and more learners will be undertaking Indigenous Studies.

There are a range of potential benefits of this study. It is likely that Indigenous Studies learners will benefit from teaching that accounts for the challenges that students are likely to experience as they undertake learning in the area. Learners may also benefit in their graduate practice as the newly acquired Indigenous Studies knowledge is applied in professional practice. It is anticipated that educators may benefit from reconceptualising their curriculum to account more particularly for learners' transformations over time. Educators may also benefit from a sharpened focus on the challenges of this teaching. Universities may benefit from this research, particularly if they heed the potential for better preparation of educators for this work. Like many Indigenous educators, I hope for eventual benefits to Indigenous peoples and communities through graduates who can work more effectively in these contexts.

## **Study limitations**

While the sample size of the project limits the generalisability of the findings, the study illustrates fresh insights on the *process* of transformative learning in Indigenous Studies in a field where empirical research is limited and focuses on what students should learn,

and whether they have learned, rather than the process by which that learning occurs. There is some criticism of the efficacy of self-reporting of student perceptions of their learning compared to actual measures of attainment (Francis-Cracknell, 2019), however for this study I intended to explore the idea of student resistance to Indigenous content bearing in mind Brookfield's (1998) caution that it is difficult to teach well without understanding the learner perception. Similar findings across three different cohorts of learners suggests a degree of robustness of the findings rather than being an artefact of the teaching of a particular individual or a particular course of study.

Students in this study were at different stages of their degrees and their lives. Some of the learners were reflecting on experience from a single subject, while others were looking back over a course of study with a strongly Indigenised curriculum. As outlined in chapter five, the final findings chapter, learners vary in their degrees of transformation, but most talked about quite profound shifts in their thinking. What is less clear, given the single interview research design, is whether those shifts in thinking and indeed action are lasting, and just what that means in terms of the individuals' professional and personal contributions to enhanced Indigenous outcomes. Other studies (Mills et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2012) have noted this limitation, suggesting that the most pressing need is perceived as being in teaching and learning in this relatively new and recently expanded area of disciplinary teaching.

### **The Study as a Platform for Further Research**

This study has charted a process of student learning in Indigenous Studies, which is like a rite of passage. This process involves both students and teachers and scholarly knowledge but also the 'truth' that our Elders value through the telling of their stories and the perspective that brings to our nation's history. Commonly in a thesis this section might suggest how other researchers could build on the findings of a study. There are potentially fresh areas of study that this project manifests. I suggest that colonial violence is a threshold concept in Indigenous Studies, however, further study is required to identify some of the additional threshold concepts that are likely to occur in the curriculum. Moodie (2019) has suggested several possibilities including race and policy. Empirical research would strengthen this theoretical work and build on the assertion of this study that colonial violence is a threshold concept. Additionally, Indigenous content is taught

in a range of disciplinary curricula, from the arts and humanities in areas such as history, or law, and increasingly in the sciences. Further studies in these contexts would be useful to ascertain the transferability of the rites of passage model and whether the threshold concepts are the same or if there are different threshold concepts for Indigenous content in various disciplinary curricula. This work may also have application in settings such as school education. As I conclude this chapter, though, I also want to chart a more personal research agenda that the culmination of this work has suggested.

### **Charting my own Future Research**

At the beginning of this thesis I charted my experiences, work and scholarship which led me to this study. Now as this project concludes, I have the opportunity to look to the next research project, which my ongoing academic role affords. Findings of this research demonstrate that student's transformative learning experiences in Indigenous Studies flow into their intellectual and personal lives. For some learners in this study, the new ways of seeing the world around them spilled into action; from personal interactions with family, to advocacy in their children's schools, or in their workplace. Further research is needed, though, to understand whether the transformations that learners experience are lasting and particularly how this affects their graduate practice (Mills et al., 2018). At present, there is a national emphasis on graduates being able to practise more effectively when working with or for Indigenous Australians (Behrendt et al., 2012; Hollinsworth, 2016b; Universities Australia, 2022). While this is a worthy ambition, the success of such policy emphasis depends on the lasting change in learner understanding which graduates can apply in practice. If the shifted thinking is enduring, it would be useful to better understand how this effect transpires in the professional lives of graduates. It is also not clear over what period the transformational learning occurs, although it is likely to be longer than a single period of study (Carey & Prince, 2015; Sonn, 2008). I am interested in a longitudinal, collaborative project which follows students from their initial Indigenous Studies learning into the early years of their graduate work. A longitudinal study would also allow an opportunity to explore the possibility of additional threshold concepts and the potential to incorporate curriculum changes that integrate the rites of passage framework.

The Elders who contributed to this study were clear about the need for learners to know the truth about Indigenous histories and cultures. Both the educators and learners saw the value of story as a vehicle for telling this truth. For learners, access to these Indigenous narratives was an important pathway to fresh understanding. The learners were less cognisant of the cost for the teachers in the telling of the stories; their own or those of others. There is an emerging body of literature which details the teaching challenges for Indigenous educators (Fredericks & White, 2018; Thunig & Jones, 2021), and to a lesser extent non-Indigenous educators (Gair, 2007, 2016; Carter & Hollinsworth, 2017), in teaching Indigenous Studies, but there is less written about the potential policy implications of these findings or what might be done to ameliorate the costs to individuals of this work. Practical suggestions such as the use of recorded material (Grogan et al., 2021), or film (Hook, 2012) are useful but do not canvass the collective implications for the sometimes-inexperienced teachers who do this work. There is a tension between the increasing recognition of the need and the desire of universities to have Indigenous scholars teaching Indigenous studies and teaching in the disciplines; and yet looking away from the cost of such teaching, which suggests a level of complicity in the personal cost for these teachers. Remedies for this problem cannot lie with individuals but rather require institutional creativity and solutions.

The final and perhaps most important area for future work is in the curriculum. While it is beyond the scope of this study to offer specific recommendations on the development of curriculum, this is an obvious area for future development. The key findings of this study characterised learning in Indigenous Studies as a rite of passage with particular roles for learners, educators and disciplinary knowledge. The tentative identification of colonial violence as a threshold concept acts as both a catalyst for reflective examination of tacit knowledge and a mechanism for the opening up of discussion of other key elements of disciplinary knowledge such as racism, and privilege. Future work to consider how to manage the three stages of the rite of passage to maximise student learning is vital. The study also raises questions about how to ethically manage what this study has clearly identified as the emotion overlay for learners, which conversely seems to be a necessary aspect of the transformative learning experience. Ideally, curricula would take account of the transitional preliminal phase to manage both the unsettling uncertainty that novices experience during the liminal phase and the subsequent challenges that can create for

educators in the classroom. In addition, it is likely to be of value to the longevity of this transformation for students to have some direction for their newly transformed understandings. As Thorpe (2017) suggests, those who do have transformative experiences are well poised to carry their new understandings into their disciplines, but learners would likely benefit from their institutions planning curriculum or activities directed to this end rather than simply hoping learners will find avenues for continuing their learning.

### **Returning to Praxis: How my Practice has Changed**

I began this thesis with an anecdote from my early career, in which I was teaching a ‘guest lecture’ on Indigenous Australia to a large group of international students and was caught off-guard by a challenging question about Aboriginal people co-sleeping with animals. The anecdote characterises some of the key difficulties for teachers of Indigenous Studies. At that time, I was probably too junior and too inexperienced to be doing that work. A single episode of teaching on Indigenous matters is likely to be of little use to learners, being unaligned with their disciplinary context and with no opportunity to build on the initial learning. Today, in my anecdotal experience, Indigenous educators are much more judicious about committing to this kind of largely unpaid and unacknowledged work, recognising that it is tokenistic and unlikely to be particularly useful to students while simply generating busy work. There has been considerable change, for better, in the two decades since that incident occurred.

Like many other educators, I had no training in university teaching. Indigenous staff with doctoral qualifications were rare when I started out. While there are fewer qualified Indigenous educators than are needed today, there are many more Indigenous staff with the doctoral qualifications considered to be an integral part of a scholarly skillset. There is policy recognition and widespread understanding that Indigenous content is critical to fill disciplinary gaps and silences. As a consequence of the policy-driven push to embed Indigenous content into curriculum, there remains pressure on junior and inexperienced staff to be responsible for not just their own teaching but larger issues of curriculum design at program level. Inexperienced educators remain poorly trained to manage the emotional labour that comes with this teaching.

It has been some time since I have taught in the way that I did at the beginning of my career; tutoring, marking, and later developing curriculum and coordinating subjects. My teaching has become supervision and guidance of academics who are less experienced in developing Indigenous curriculum. Drawing on the findings of this study (and the plethora of associated literature I have read in conjunction with the study) I am mindful of the challenges for both learners and educators. I work with Indigenous tutors, for example, who are upset and unsettled by learner comments in their written assessment tasks. I acknowledge and recognise that such responses are indeed challenging, but that the educator work is critical if students are to have transformative learning experiences.

This research helps to illustrate both the value of the work of educators in Indigenous Studies and to elucidate the often challenging but also life-changing experiences of learners. The realisation of the reality of colonial violence can indeed open portals to new understanding of the truths of the Elders for even the most unwilling of learners. The work ties together the intertwined threads of learner resistance and educator emotional labour, woven with story and truth, ultimately illuminating the ‘gift’ of Indigenous Studies for learners.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A Invited Presentations Prior to Study Commencement and Papers Aligned but not Directly Related to the Thesis

#### Presentations

Page, S. (2013). *More than mimicry: Using a Threshold Concepts framework to enhance learning and teaching in Indigenous Studies*. Invited presentation, Office of Learning Teaching Forum, Indigenous Teaching: Building an Evidence Base, University of Melbourne, 2<sup>nd</sup> October.

Page, S. (2013). *Learning Liminality: Using a Threshold Concepts framework to enhance pedagogic practice in Indigenous Studies*. Invited presentation, Australian Indigenous Studies Learning & Teaching Network, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 25<sup>th</sup> October.

#### Additional Aligned Refereed Papers

Page, S., Trudgett, M. & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2019). Tactics or Strategies? Exploring everyday requirements for the successful implementation of an Indigenous Graduate Attributes project, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(4), 390-403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1609390>

Page, S., Trudgett, M. & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2019). Creating a Degree Focused Pedagogical Framework to Guide Indigenous Graduate Attribute Curriculum Development. *Higher Education*, 78(1), 1-15, DOI 0.1007/s10734-018-0324-4

Bodkin-Andrews, G., Page, S., & Trudgett, M. (2019). Working towards accountability in embedding Indigenous studies: Evidence from an Indigenous Graduate Attribute evaluation instrument. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(2), 232-260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944119863927>

Bodkin-Andrews, G. Trudgett, M. & Page, S. (2022). Shaming the Silences: Indigenous Graduate Attributes and the Privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices. *Critical Studies in Education*. 63(1), 96-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1553795>

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Page, S., Trudgett, M. & Sullivan, C. (2017). Past, present and future: Acknowledging Indigenous Achievement and Aspiration in Higher Education. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 4, 29-51.

Page, S., Trudgett, M., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2016). Exploring an Indigenous graduate attribute project through a critical race theory lens. In M. Davis & A. Goody (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: The Shape of Higher Education*, 39, 258-267.

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## Appendix B Email requesting Deputy Vice Chancellor Research permission to undertake research on university campus



Dear (insert title/name),

I am writing to seek permission to undertake research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff, Elders and students, in your university. The research is being undertaken through the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University, to meet the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University). The research has received Human Research Ethics approval (2015/154) from the Australian National University. I am an Aboriginal academic, and currently hold an academic position (Professor, Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges) at the University of Technology, Sydney.

I am undertaking a qualitative research project which aims to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies, particularly the topics and ideas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and Elders consider are important in the curriculum and the topics and ideas that students find challenging. At the end of the research, as well as completing a doctoral thesis, I expect to be able to develop a framework to inform curriculum development, teaching and learning in this critical area. As part of the research, I wish to speak to the following:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff, who are teaching first year Indigenous Studies units of study

Undergraduate students enrolled in first year Indigenous Studies classes (with staff permission)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders-in-Residence or Elders Council members, who may be employed or affiliated with your university.

With your permission, I will send an email, with one follow-up email, to the Head of your Indigenous Studies Centre, asking them to forward my email to teachers and Elders who might be interested in participating in the research. With permission of the relevant academic staff member, students will be recruited following an introductory briefing session during their first lecture or tutorial, in 2016.

I have attached a copy of the approved application, including the supporting documentation and supervisor details. I am best contacted via email ([susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au)), but can also be contacted by phone on 02 9514 3878.

Yours sincerely,  
Susan Page  
PhD Candidate (SID \_\_\_\_\_)  
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

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## Appendix C Email to Heads of Indigenous Centres Inviting Academic Staff to Participate in the Research

**Subject: Student Learning in Indigenous Studies Research Project**



Dear (Insert Name)

I am writing to seek your assistance in contacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff, who may be interested in participating in a qualitative research project which aims to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies, particularly the topics and ideas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and Elders consider are vital in the curriculum and the topics and ideas that students find challenging.

The research is being undertaken through the Centre for Indigenous Economic Policy Research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University, to meet the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University). As you may be aware, I am also an Aboriginal academic, and currently hold an academic position (Professor, Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges) at the University of Technology, Sydney. This study has received Human Research Ethics approval (insert number when received) from the Australian National University and permission to undertake research in your university, has been granted by your Deputy Vice Chancellor Research (insert title/name).

As part of the research study, I wish to speak to the following:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff, who are teaching first year Indigenous Studies units of study
- Undergraduate students enrolled in first year Indigenous Studies classes (with staff permission)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders-in-Residence or Elders Council members, who may be employed or affiliated with your university.

I would appreciate it if you could forward this email to relevant staff. With permission of the relevant academic staff member, students will be recruited following an introductory briefing session during their first lecture or tutorial in 2016.

Academic staff and Elders, who are interested in participating in the research can contact me on this email address ([susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au)), or by phone on 02 9514 3878. A participant information sheet with further information about the research project and key personnel, is attached to this email.

I appreciate your assistance in this matter.

Kind regards,

Susan Page  
PhD Candidate (SID \_\_\_\_\_)  
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research  
Australian National University

## Appendix D Learner Recruitment Powerpoint Presentation

1

Australian National University

Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.

*A Qualitative Research Project*

Susan Page  
PhD Candidate  
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

2

Australian National University

### The Research Team

- Susan Page (PhD candidate)

#### Supervisors

- Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab (Panel Chair)
- Dr Margaret Kiley
- Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University).

3

Australian National University

### Research Aims

- To explore how students learn in Indigenous Studies
- To identify what knowledge students find troublesome in Indigenous Studies
- To identify threshold concepts in the discipline of Indigenous Studies
- To develop a framework to inform curriculum development, teaching and learning in first year Indigenous Studies.

4

Australian National University

### The Research Study

5

Australian National University

### Participating in the Research Project

**How**  
Participate in an interview or focus group, with a second follow-up interview with your permission.

**When**  
At a time convenient to you.

**Why**  
To assist the research team to understand more about how students learn in Indigenous Studies & for you to learn more about how research works in practice.

On completion of the interviews students will receive a \$30 Coles/Myer voucher

6

Australian National University

### Thank you.

#### Questions & comments.

If you would like to participate in the research or to ask further questions, please contact Susan Page  
[susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au)  
02 9514 3878

This research has Human Research Ethics Approval from the Australian National University (Page\_2015\_154) and your Deputy Vice Chancellor Research has given permission for students to be invited to participate in the research.

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## Appendix E Learner Participant Information and Consent Forms

### Amended learner information form



#### Student Participant Information Sheet

##### Researcher:

This study is being conducted by Susan Page and is being undertaken to meet the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University). Susan is studying at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Susan is an Aboriginal academic (current role Professor, Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, University of Technology Sydney) who has worked in academic roles in universities in NSW for 20 years. She has long been interested in how teaching can inspire and enhance student learning.

**Project Title:** Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.

##### General Outline of the Project:

Description and Methodology: This qualitative research project aims to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies, particularly the topics and ideas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and Elders think are important and the topics and ideas that students find challenging. I'm particularly interested in ideas that students get stuck on and what happens when understanding occurs or doesn't occur. At the end of the research, as well as completing a doctoral thesis, I expect to be able to develop a framework which could inform curriculum development, teaching and learning.

**Participants:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff and Elders will be interviewed in person or via phone/skype if preferred by the participant. Student participants will be invited to participate in 1-2 interviews. Academic staff will be asked if they are willing to have their students, studying in first year Indigenous Studies, invited to participate in the research.

**Use of Data and Feedback:** The data will be used to inform my doctoral thesis, conference presentations and journal publications. The data will be kept confidential, and your identity will not be revealed to anyone beyond the research team named here (as far as allowed by law). Participants will be sent a copy of their transcribed interview data to check and modify, if they wish. All participants will be sent a summary of the research findings. The student summary will be sent in Powerpoint form.

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**Participant Involvement:**

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal: Participation in the project is *voluntary* and you may, without any penalty, decline to take part or withdraw from the research without providing an explanation, at any time until the work is prepared for publication. You may also decline to answer particular questions when participating in the research. If you do decide to withdraw from the study, your data will not be used in the study and any recordings or transcripts of recordings will be destroyed. Students can undertake the unit of study without participating in the research.

*Additional information for focus group participants*

For students participating in focus groups please be aware that it may be more difficult to isolate your individual data from a recording once the focus group has been completed. Individual voices may be difficult to identify during the transcribing process. As a consequence, it may be difficult or impossible to withdraw your data from the study at a later date. Participation in a focus group will require consent to being recorded. Individual interviews would be preferable if participants don't wish to be recorded.

What does participation in the research request of you? With your teachers' permission, I will give a brief presentation about the research during your first lecture or tutorial. Following the research presentation in the lecture, interested students can *email the researcher* (Susan Page) indicating their willingness to participate. You will be asked to participate in two focus groups or individual interviews (in person or via phone/skype); one before week 6 and one after week 10 of your study. I estimate that the interviews should take up no more than 2 hours over the semester. I will not talk to your teachers about which students are participating in the research. Your teachers will not have access to the interview data.

Location and Duration: The focus groups and face to face interviews will be conducted at an on-campus facility such as the library or a tutorial space. Each individual interview or focus group should take no more than an hour. Participants will receive a \$30 gift voucher at the completion of the second interview, in recognition of the time you have given to the research.

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**Risks:** The risks of this research are minimal. The researcher will be asking you to talk about your experiences of learning in Indigenous Studies. Although all aspects of the research will be kept confidential there is a small risk that participants may be identified. To minimise this risk students are advised to record interviews in a private space. Students participating in the research will not be identified to the academic staff or Elders and your grades will not in any way be related to participating in the research. Your university will not be identified.

**Benefits:**

It is expected that this research will enhance our understandings of how students learn in Indigenous Studies and lead to new approaches to teaching and learning in this important area. While the personal benefits to individual participants are likely to be small or none, student participants may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your learning in ways that you might not ordinarily do. Learning about research through participation in a study, is a useful way to understand how research works in practice.

**Implications of Participation:** Declining to take part in the research or withdrawing during the course of the research will not have any negative implications for your study or grades. The researchers will not talk to the teachers in your Indigenous Studies unit about which students are participating in the research. Only the researchers will know which students are participating in the research.

**Confidentiality:**

**Confidentiality:** All aspects of the study will be strictly confidential, unless required by law, and only the investigators named above will have access to information about participants. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected computer, and no one but the researchers and transcribers will be allowed to listen to the recordings. Every effort will be made to ensure that neither you nor your institution will be identifiable in any publications from the study. If permission is given for use of individual quotes, a pseudonym will be used to ensure your confidentiality is maintained.

*Additional information for focus group participants*

If students are taking part in focus groups, participants are reminded to maintain the confidentiality of group discussions, and to avoid making statements of a confidential nature or that are defamatory of any person.

**Data Storage:**

Where: Hard data (consent forms, paper copies of transcripts) will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Technology, Sydney. Electronic material will be kept on a password protected computer, only accessible by the primary investigator.

**How long:** The data will be kept for five years following publication and will then be destroyed.

**Destruction of Data:** The recordings, transcripts of recordings and data uploaded to analysis software will be destroyed. Hard copied of transcripts will be destroyed via confidential waste systems. Electronic data will be deleted.

**Queries and Concerns:**

Contact Details for More Information: If you would like to discuss the research further or are interested in participating in this research, please contact the Primary Investigator, Susan Page,

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by email [susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au) preferably or by phone: 0295143878. Provide name contact details (at least telephone and email). Questions can also be directed to my supervisor Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, 02 6125 8208, [jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au](mailto:jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au). Additional contact details for supervisory team: Dr Margaret Kiley, 02 6125 2690, [margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au](mailto:margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au), Professor Jeannie Herbert, 02 6885 7348, [jherbert@csu.edu.au](mailto:jherbert@csu.edu.au).

**Contact Details if in Distress:** Participating in this research is not likely to be distressing, however studying can sometimes cause stress and anxiety. If this happens to you please contact the counselling service at your university. If you are an Indigenous student, your university's Indigenous Centre may also be able to assist you. If you are having trouble completing assignments you should contact the academic responsible for the unit you are studying. If I am concerned by comments on your recordings I may contact you to check that the research is not causing undue stress. The researchers will not speak to your teachers about you.

#### **Ethics Committee Clearance:**

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns or complaints about how this research has been conducted, please contact:

Ethics Manager  
The ANU Human Research Ethics Committee  
The Australian National University  
Telephone: +61 2 6125 3427  
Email: [Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au](mailto:Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au)

## **Original learner participant information form**

Sections highlighted in grey below were amended following approval from the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (amended form above).



### **Student Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Researcher:**

This study is being conducted by Susan Page and is being undertaken to meet the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University). Susan is studying at the Centre for Indigenous Economic Policy Research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Susan is an Aboriginal academic (current role Professor, Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, University of Technology Sydney) who has worked in academic roles in universities in NSW for 20 years. She has long been interested in how teaching can inspire and enhance student learning.

**Project Title:** Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.

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## General Outline of the Project:

**Description and Methodology:** This qualitative research project aims to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies, particularly the topics and ideas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and Elders think are important and the topics and ideas that students find challenging. I'm particularly interested in ideas that students get stuck on and what happens when understanding occurs or doesn't occur. At the end of the research, as well as completing a doctoral thesis, I expect to be able to develop a framework which could inform curriculum development, teaching and learning.

**Participants:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff and Elders will be interviewed in person or via phone/skype if preferred by the participant. Student participants will self-record their responses to set of questions when working on their assignments. Academic staff will be asked if they are willing to have their students, studying in first year Indigenous Studies, invited to participate in the research.

**Use of Data and Feedback:** The data will be used to inform my doctoral thesis, conference presentations and journal publications. The data will be kept confidential, and your identity will not be revealed to anyone beyond the research team named here (as far as allowed by law). Participants will be sent a copy of their transcribed interview data to check and modify, if they wish. All participants will be sent a summary of the research findings. The student summary will be sent in Powerpoint form.

### Participant Involvement:

**Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal:** Participation in the project is voluntary and you may, without any penalty, decline to take part or withdraw from the research without providing an explanation, at any time until the work is prepared for publication. You may also decline to answer particular questions when participating in the research. If you do decide to withdraw from the study, your data will not be used in the study and any recordings or transcripts of recordings will be destroyed. Students can undertake the unit of study without participating in the research.

What does participation in the research request of you? With your teachers' permission, I will give a brief presentation about the research during your first lecture or tutorial. Following the research presentation in the lecture, interested students can email the researcher (Susan Page) indicating their willingness to participate. You will be asked to self-record your responses to 5 questions, on no more than three occasions, while you are working on an assignment for your Indigenous Studies unit of study. I estimate that the responses should take up no more than 2-3 hours over the semester. I will not talk to your teachers about which students are participating in the research. Your recordings will be sent to me via email and your teacher will not have access to them.

**Self-recording:** Many mobile phones and tablets have inbuilt audio recorders which are connected to email. If your device has one of these simply record your responses to the interview questions on your device and email the recording to me when it is completed. If your device does not have a recorder, you can download a free recording App such as 'Smart Voice Recorder' which will allow you to record. Email the recording to me ([susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au)) when completed. Once you are satisfied that the email has been sent, you should delete your recording from your device, to minimise the risk of accidentally forwarding your recording to an

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unintended recipient and to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained. I would appreciate it if you could check the sound quality early in the recording.

**Location and Duration:** You will record your responses to the semi-structured interview schedule when you are working on your assignment tasks for your Indigenous Studies unit. The recordings will be done when you are studying and could be done at your home, or at an on-campus facility such as the library or a tutorial space. If you don't wish others to know that you are participating in the research, you should do the recording in a private space. Each recording should take no more than an hour. Recordings will then be emailed to me. Please delete your recordings once they have been sent to me. Participants will receive a \$30 gift voucher in recognition of the time you have given to the research.

**Risks:** The risks of this research are minimal. The researcher will be asking you to talk about your experiences of learning in Indigenous Studies. Although all aspects of the research will be kept confidential there is a small risk that participants may be identified. To minimise this risk students are advised to record interviews in a private space. Students participating in the research will not be identified to the academic staff or Elders and your grades will not in any way be related to participating in the research. Your university will not be identified.

**Benefits:**

It is expected that this research will enhance our understandings of how students learn in Indigenous Studies and lead to new approaches to teaching and learning in this important area. While the personal benefits to individual participants are likely to be small or none, student participants may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your learning in ways that you might not ordinarily do. Learning about research through participation in a study, is a useful way to understand how research works in practice.

**Implications of Participation:** Declining to take part in the research or withdrawing during the course of the research, will not have any negative implications for your study or grades. The researchers will not talk to the teachers in your Indigenous Studies unit about which students are participating in the research. Only the researchers will know which students are participating in the research.

**Confidentiality:**

**Confidentiality:** All aspects of the study will be strictly confidential, unless required by law, and only the investigators named above will have access to information about participants. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected computer, and no one but the researchers and transcribers will be allowed to listen to the recordings. Every effort will be made to ensure that neither you nor your institution will be identifiable in any publications from the study. If permission is given for use of individual quotes, a pseudonym will be used to ensure your confidentiality is maintained. Students are encouraged to undertake their recordings at a time when they are on their own and not studying with others.

**Data Storage:**

**Where:** Hard data (consent forms, paper copies of transcripts) will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Technology, Sydney. Electronic material will be kept on a password protected computer, only accessible by the primary investigator.

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**How long:** The data will be kept for five years following publication and will then be destroyed.

**Destruction of Data:** The recordings, transcripts of recordings and data uploaded to analysis software will be destroyed. Hard copied of transcripts will be destroyed via confidential waste systems. Electronic data will be deleted.

**Queries and Concerns:**

**Contact Details for More Information:** If you would like to discuss the research further or are interested in participating in this research, please contact the Primary Investigator, Susan Page, by email [susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au) preferably or by phone: 0295143878. Provide name contact details (at least telephone and email). Questions can also be directed to my supervisor Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, 02 6125 8208, [jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au](mailto:jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au). Additional contact details for supervisory team: Dr Margaret Kiley, 02 6125 2690, [margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au](mailto:margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au), Professor Jeannie Herbert, 02 6885 7348, [jherbert@csu.edu.au](mailto:jherbert@csu.edu.au).

**Contact Details if in Distress:** Participating in this research is not likely to be distressing, however studying can sometimes cause stress and anxiety. If this happens to you please contact the counselling service at your university. If you are an Indigenous student, your university's Indigenous Centre may also be able to assist you. If you are having trouble completing assignments, you should contact the academic responsible for the unit you are studying. If I am concerned by comments on your recordings, I may contact you to check that the research is not causing undue stress. The researchers will not speak to your teachers about you.

**Ethics Committee Clearance:**

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns or complaints about how this research has been conducted, please contact:

Ethics Manager  
The ANU Human Research Ethics Committee  
The Australian National University  
Telephone: +61 2 6125 3427  
Email: [Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au](mailto:Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au)

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## Learner consent form



### **WRITTEN CONSENT for Students**

#### **Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.**

I have read and understood the Information Sheet you have given me about the research project, and I have had any questions and concerns about the project (listed here)

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addressed to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the project.

YES

NO

I agree to my interview being recorded.

YES

NO

I agree to be quoted directly, without the quotation being attributed to me by name.

YES  NO

I would like a copy of my transcribed interview sent to me for checking. YES

NO

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature:.....

---

## Appendix F Learner Interview Schedule

### Student Interview Questions

*Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.*

PhD Researcher: Susan Page (susan.page@anu.edu.au), (Supervisors Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert, Charles Sturt University)

Record your responses onto a device of your choice (phone, ipad, voice recorder). Once you have sent the recording to me (and you're sure I've received it) please erase it from your device, to protect your confidentiality. See Participant Information Sheet for more detail.

### Demographic Questions

How old are you?

What degree are you studying?

What is your gender?

What year of study are you in?

How are you studying (On-campus, Distance, Mixed mode, Other)?

Is this subject an elective subject or mandated subject (it's a formal part of my degree)?

Are you an Indigenous Australian or international student?

Did you study Indigenous Studies at school?

Open Ended Questions.

1. What have you found easiest to learn in Indigenous Studies so far?
2. What are you finding the most challenging ideas to learn? What things do you get stuck on?
3. How do the challenges affect your learning?
4. What, if anything, has helped you to overcome the challenges?
5. How, if at all, has your thinking about Indigenous Studies changed to this point?

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## Appendix G Staff/Elders Participant Information and Consent Forms

### Participant information form



#### Researchers

This study is being conducted by Susan Page, and is being undertaken to meet the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, Dr Margaret Kiley, & Professor Jeannie Herbert (Charles Sturt University). Susan is studying at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Susan is an Aboriginal academic (current role Professor, Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, University of Technology Sydney) who has worked in academic roles in universities in NSW for 20 years. She has long been interested in how teaching can inspire and enhance student learning.

**Project Title: Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.**

#### General Outline of the Project:

**Description and Methodology:** This qualitative research project aims to explore student learning in Indigenous Studies, particularly the topics and ideas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and Elders think are important and the topics and ideas that students find challenging. I'm interested in what academics and Elders consider are the critical concepts which students must grasp before they can fully understand Indigenous Studies. At the end of the research, as well as completing a doctoral thesis, I expect to be able to develop a framework to inform curriculum development, teaching and learning.

**Participants:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff and Elders and students will be interviewed in person or via phone/skype if preferred by the participant. Student participants will self-record their responses to set of questions when working on their assignments. Academic staff will be asked if they are willing to have their students, studying in first year Indigenous Studies invited to participate in the research.

**Use of Data and Feedback:** The data will be used to inform my doctoral thesis, conference presentations and journal publications. The data will be kept confidential and your identity will not be revealed to anyone beyond the research team named here (as far as allowed by law). Participants will be sent a copy of their transcribed interview data to check and modify, if they wish. All participants will be sent a summary of the research findings.

#### Participant Involvement:

**Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal:** Participation in the project is voluntary and you may, without any penalty, decline to take part or withdraw from the research at any time until the work is prepared for publication, without providing an explanation. You may also refuse to answer particular questions when participating in the research. If you do decide to withdraw

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from the study, your data will not be used in the study and any recordings or transcripts of recordings will be destroyed.

What does participation in the research request of you? With your permission, interviews will be recorded and transcribed. If willing, academic staff will also be asked to provide a copy of the unit outline of the first year Indigenous Studies unit they are teaching. Academic staff will also be asked if they are willing to have their student invited to participate in the research. This would involve a brief presentation about the research during the first lecture or tutorial. Students would then contact the researcher if they are interested in participating in the research.

**Location and Duration:**

The research will take place at your university campus, either in your office or a location of your choice on campus. If you agree to participate Susan Page will conduct one interview with you. Interviews will take around an hour to an hour and a half. Interviews length will depend, in part, on how much you wish to say. Participants can be interviewed in pairs or small groups if that is preferable. Participants will receive a \$30 gift voucher in recognition of the time you have given to the research.

**Risks:** The risks of this research are minimal. The researcher will be asking you to talk about teaching or learning in Indigenous Studies. Although all aspects of the research will be kept confidential there is a small risk that participants may be identified. To minimise this risk participants will be able to choose where interviews are conducted, and I will not discuss which universities are involved in the study with my colleagues. Students participating in the research will not be identified to the academic staff or Elders.

**Benefits:**

It is expected that this research will enhance our understandings of how students learn in Indigenous Studies and lead to new approaches to teaching and learning in this important area. Whilst the personal benefits to individual participants will be small or none, for academics and Elders there will be an opportunity to contribute to potential innovations in curriculum and policy and to contribute to identifying what is vital to teach in first year Indigenous Studies. Student participants may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their learning in ways that they might not ordinarily do and there will be the opportunity to learn about how research works in practice, an important topic for any university graduate.

**Implications of Participation:** Declining to take part in the research or withdrawing during the course of the research will not have any negative implications for your work or your institution. If students have already agreed to take part in the study, they will continue in the research unless individual students indicate they wish to withdraw from the research. Students participating in the research will not be identified to academic staff or Elders, by the researchers.

**Exclusion criteria:**

**Participant Limitation:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics teaching first year Indigenous Studies units of study and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders who are working at universities or are part of a university Elders Council.

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### **Confidentiality:**

**Confidentiality:** All aspects of the study will be strictly confidential, unless required by law, and only the investigators named above will have access to information about participants. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected computer, and no one but the researchers and transcribers will be allowed to listen to the recordings. Every effort will be made to ensure that neither you nor your institution will be identifiable in any such publications. If permission is given for use of individual quotes, a pseudonym will be used to ensure your confidentiality is maintained. If academics or Elders wish to be interviewed in pairs or small groups, participants are reminded to maintain the confidentiality of group discussions, avoid making statements of a confidential nature or that are defamatory of any person. Students are encouraged to undertake their recordings at a time when they are on their own and not studying with others.

### **Data Storage:**

Where: Hard data (consent forms, paper copies of transcripts) will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Technology, Sydney. Electronic material will be kept on a password protected computer, only accessible by the primary investigator.

**How long:** The data will be kept for five years following publication and will then be destroyed.

**Destruction of Data:** The recordings, transcripts of recordings and data uploaded to analysis software will be destroyed. Hard copied of transcripts will be destroyed via confidential waste systems. Electronic data will be deleted.

### **Queries and Concerns:**

**Contact Details for More Information:** If you would like to discuss the research further or are interested in participating in this research, please contact the Primary Investigator, Susan Page, by email [susan.page@anu.edu.au](mailto:susan.page@anu.edu.au) preferably or by phone: 0295143878. Provide name contact details (at least telephone and email). Questions can also be directed to my supervisor Dr Robert G. (Jerry) Schwab, 02 6125 8208, [jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au](mailto:jerry.schwab@anu.edu.au). Additional contact details for supervisory team: Dr Margaret Kiley, 02 6125 2690, [margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au](mailto:margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au), Professor Jeannie Herbert, 02 6885 7348, [jherbert@csu.edu.au](mailto:jherbert@csu.edu.au).

**Contact Details if in Distress:** Academics & Elders: If you are distressed during a face to face interview, I will stop the interview and only resume on your advice. It is very unlikely, but if it should become necessary, each university has an employee counselling service.

### **Ethics Committee Clearance:**

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns or complaints about how this research has been conducted, please contact:

Ethics Manager

The ANU Human Research Ethics Committee

The Australian National University

Telephone: +61 2 6125 3427

Email: [Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au](mailto:Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au)

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## Consent form



### WRITTEN CONSENT for Academic Staff/Elders

#### **Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.**

I have read and understood the Information Sheet you have given me about the research project, and I have had any questions and concerns about the project (listed here \_\_\_\_\_) addressed to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the project. YES  NO

I agree to be quoted directly, without the quotation being attributed to me by name.

YES  NO

I would like a copy of my transcribed interview sent to me for checking.

YES  NO

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to this interview being audio-recorded YES  NO

I agree to my students, enrolled in \_\_\_\_\_ being invited to participate in the research project YES  NO

Signature:.....

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## **Appendix H Educator Interview Schedule**

### **Academic Staff Interview Questions**

1. Are the students currently studying mainly undertaking the unit as an elective choice or is it a mandatory unit?
2. What are the really critical topics or ideas that an Indigenous Studies, first year student should learn?
3. How do you teach these topics and ideas?
4. In what ways do your students learn in Indigenous Studies?
5. What topics or ideas do students struggle to understand? What are the main learning challenges?
6. What student behaviours do you see to indicate that students are struggling to understand?
7. What do you do to assist students when they are struggling to understand?
8. Does this change over the semester?
9. What student behaviours do you see to indicate that students have really understood and have mastered the vital discipline knowledge?

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## Appendix I Human Research Ethics Approval

Human Ethics Protocol 2015/154 - Susan Page

<https://outlook.office.com/owa/?viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&I...>

### Human Ethics Protocol 2015/154

aries@anu.edu.au

Mon 22/06/2015 1:13 PM

To: Susan Page <Susan.Page@anu.edu.au>;

Cc: Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au <human.ethics.officer@anu.edu.au>; Margaret Kiley <Margaret.Kiley@anu.edu.au>;

THIS IS A SYSTEM-GENERATED E-MAIL. PLEASE DO NOT REPLY. SEE BELOW FOR E-MAIL CONTACT DETAILS.

Dear Ms Susan Page,

Protocol: 2015/154

Beyond Black and White: Exploring Threshold Concepts in first year Australian Indigenous Studies curricula.

I am pleased to advise you that your Human Ethics application received approval by the Chair of the HREC #4 - 24 April 2015 on 22/06/2015.

PLEASE NOTE: Chair's Comments:

"Thank you for your detailed responses to the HREC's concerns, and for the updated Information Sheets and consent forms. Thank you also for providing the relevant letters of support and for your clarifications around the

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Human Ethics Protocol 2015/154 - Susan Page

<https://outlook.office.com/owa/?viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&I...>

date shown approved. For longer projects you are required to seek renewed approval from the Committee.

All the best with your research,

Human Ethics Manager

Research Ethics

Research Integrity & Compliance

Ground Floor

Chancelry Lower10B

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W: <http://researchservices.anu.edu.au/ori/human/index.php>