

Teaching the Teachers Indigenous Australian Studies: A National Priority!

Rhonda Craven

University of Sydney

Reconciliation between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians is a critical goal of the Commonwealth Government by the year 2001. Long term reconciliation cannot be achieved and maintained without effective teacher education so that all Australian students can be taught Indigenous Australian Studies appropriately. It is a national disgrace that despite Government reports over a period of 20 years only a few Australian universities have recently introduced core Indigenous Australian Studies as a component of their curricula. To address some of these problems the University of New South Wales has had carriage of a Project of National Significance funded by DEET. This project has produced a framework statement that provides guidelines to assist universities to develop core Indigenous Studies subjects that meet the needs of their Indigenous communities, a sample model of a core studies approach that has been trialed successfully, sample lecture/tutorial notes based on the example model, guidelines for using appropriate terminology, and four teacher-oriented professional development videotapes. This paper provides an overview of the 'Teaching the Teachers' project and the example resources produced to support universities to develop core Indigenous Australian Studies subjects in consultation with university Indigenous communities.

Background

Over 1992-1996 the University of New South Wales has had carriage of a Commonwealth Government Project of National Significance. This project, widely known as the 'Teaching the Teachers' project, has involved developing an example core subject in Indigenous Australian Studies for student primary teachers. The project has been supported and welcomed by national Indigenous organisations, Indigenous communities, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, education authorities, professional associations and other universities. The bulk of the project was published in May 1996 and an introductory textbook is expected to be published in 1998.

The project has provided the impetus for more Australian teacher education institutions to begin to recognise their responsibility to prepare student teachers to teach Indigenous Australian Studies effectively. In 1992 only 1 University in Australia, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), required student primary teachers to undertake a core Indigenous Australian Studies subject as a compulsory component of preservice teacher education. As a direct result of the UNSW 'Teaching the Teachers' project five Australian universities trialed core Indigenous Australian Studies in 1994 and seven other universities have introduced core studies since the release of the project in 1996. This is an historic

achievement in Australian teacher education and a major contribution to the reconciliation process in Australian society.

The Commonwealth Government is committed to the process of Aboriginal Reconciliation by the year 2001. Critical to the process of reconciliation is the Social Justice package being developed by the Commonwealth. Social Justice for Indigenous Australians includes an education that 'not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance' (ATSIC, 1994, p. 3). Prerequisite to these processes is educating all Australians to 'value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage'. This cannot be achieved and maintained long-term without appropriate teacher education courses. Yet despite 20 years of Government reports, very few Australian universities have incorporated Indigenous Australian Studies into their core curricula.

A number of universities that specialise in educating Indigenous students offer appropriate Indigenous Australian Studies teacher education courses. However, there is a dearth of institutions offering core studies for non-Indigenous students. This is potentially catastrophic for both the reconciliation process and the Federal Government's social justice measures to 'improve educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples' (ATSIC, 1994, p. 7) in that the bulk of the Australian teaching service is comprised of non-Indigenous Australians.

Of the institutions that have introduced core Indigenous Australian Studies, most have done so over 1994 - 1997, as a direct result of the UNSW 'Teaching the Teachers' project. Therefore rigorous research has not as yet been undertaken to identify the key successful pedagogy utilised in current teacher education courses that primarily target non-Indigenous students. There is also a critical need for core Indigenous Australian perspectives to be introduced in secondary teacher education courses. In addition, the majority of universities have not as yet introduced nor identified strategies for incorporating Indigenous perspectives across the teacher education curriculum at all levels of teacher education.

At the postgraduate and inservice level, "There are too many teachers, and other school staff, and educational administrators, who know nothing of Aboriginal history, or Aboriginal Education issues, or the cultural differences of Aboriginal students" (Linda Burney, President, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.). The average age of teachers in Australia is 41 and rising. This means most teachers have grown up in 'White Australia'. There is a critical need for inservice education.

Proactive curriculum development in Indigenous Australian Studies in teacher education courses is of national social and cultural importance in contributing to the goals of reconciliation and social justice. Research in this area is vital in order to encourage more teacher education institutions to utilise existing best practices.

Rationale

Since 1975 Commonwealth Government sponsored reports have emphasised the need to reform the teacher education curriculum to adequately prepare student teachers to teach Indigenous Australian Studies and Indigenous children effectively. Recommendation 22 of the Aboriginal Consultative Group Report to the Commonwealth Government in 1975 recommended 'all teacher trainees in Australia should study courses relating to Aboriginal society' (p. 26). In 1979 a meeting of the Australian Education Council endorsed the principle that there should be promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies as core units of all preservice and inservice education programs.

In 1985, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs noted that 'a strong case exists for including Aboriginal Studies at the tertiary level and, in particular, in teacher training courses' (para 13.15). This proposal was further confirmed in 1986 by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) recommendation that 'there should be at least one compulsory component of Aboriginal Studies/Aboriginal education in every preservice teacher education course, and in general in all inservice courses' (p. 28). The 1992 Schools Council report suggested that 'all teachers, through their initial training should experience a compulsory component of Aboriginal studies and education' (p. 31).

In 1991 the 'Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody' recommended that 'all teacher training courses include courses which will enable student teachers to understand that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters, and to teach the curriculum which reflects those matters' (Recommendation 295). The Royal Commission also emphasised the critical nature of reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians. In response to this report the Commonwealth Government established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. A central role of the Council is 'to bring about through education, a greater awareness of Aboriginal history, cultures, dispossession, continuing disadvantage and the need to redress that disadvantage' (Tickner, 1991, p.5). This recognised the critical role of education in the reconciliation process.

Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs) since the 1970s have been calling on teacher education institutions to incorporate Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies into teacher education curriculum.

In 1990 the 'National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy' came into effect. This policy was endorsed by all State and Territory governments. The policy sets out 21 long-term goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Included in these goals are:

20. To enable Aboriginal students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity.

21. To provide all Australian students with an understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 1993, p. 14).

Fundamental to the achievement of these goals is appropriate teacher education.

The 1994 Project of National Significance report 'Teacher Education Preservice: Preparing teachers to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' recommends: 'that the Commonwealth and the States/Territories ensure that strategies to implement the National Aboriginal Education Policy include opportunities to ensure that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people be given the opportunity to undertake teacher training with a specific emphasis on the education of Aboriginal children' (Bourke, Dow, and Lucas, 1994, p. 20). It is disappointing to note that Bourke et al. (1994) found that even though most teacher education courses include Social Studies units "very few specify Aboriginal Studies as a core component of the course" (p. 31).

The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p.15) recommended that teacher education institutions implement the recommendations put forth by the Bourke et al. report. This report also recommended that by the year 2001 employers of teaching staff should "provide inservice courses in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness, counter-racism and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for all staff" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p.16). Therefore the critical nature of inservice education has been recognised in this recent report.

Despite the fact that Commonwealth Government reports since 1975 have emphasised the need to reform the teacher education curriculum to incorporate core Indigenous Australian Studies and that the process of reconciliation is inextricably linked with education, only a handful of Australian teacher education institutions offer such courses. Due to the small numbers of teacher education institutions embracing the need for core Indigenous Australian Studies we are yet to ascertain how the teacher education curriculum should and could be articulated across disciplines to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and across undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The 'Teaching the Teachers' Project of National Significance

Over the period of 1992-1996 the University of New South Wales has been developing resources to assist universities to devise their own core courses in Indigenous Australian Studies in consultation with university Indigenous Education Centres and Indigenous communities. The 'Teaching the Teachers' project - Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre-service Teacher Education - has been funded as a Project of National Significance by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) as a part response to Recommendation 295 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

'Teaching the Teachers' was instigated and inspired by the late Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal (Kath Walker). It was Oodgeroo's wish that the University of New South Wales have carriage of the project. Until her untimely passing Oodgeroo was Joint Principal Consultant to the project with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (NSW AECG Inc.). It was Oodgeroo's last wish that this project succeed.

A model core Indigenous Australian Studies subject and support resources have been designed over a period of three years from 1992-1995. NSW AECG has been Joint Principal Consultant from the inception of the project and project materials have been workshoped at regional and State NSW AECG meetings since 1992. All project resources have been endorsed by the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (NFAECGs).

On behalf of the University of New South Wales, project development has been guided by an Elders Committee and a Steering Committee comprising these Elders, other Indigenous community members, representatives of Indigenous organisations including representatives from the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, teacher educators, education authorities and professional associations.

Obviously given the diversity of Indigenous cultures it was not possible nor desirable to design one course for all universities. Instead the project team has developed an example model subject and a number of resources to help universities get started on developing their own core courses.

Resources developed include:

- a framework statement that provides advice to universities on how to get started designing a core Indigenous Australian Studies subject for teacher education courses in consultation with their University Indigenous Education Centre and Indigenous community members.

- a model core subject manual of example lecture and tutorial notes that have been trialed successfully by the University of New South Wales and adapted by the University of Western Sydney, Monash University, La Trobe University, and Charles Sturt University to meet the needs of their individual teacher education courses and the needs of their Indigenous communities - these notes are also useful for secondary Social Education teachers teaching Aboriginal Studies;
- a terminology list to assist teacher educators and teachers use appropriate terminology in the classroom that avoids conveying misconceptions and stereotypes (this booklet is also useful for students examining some of the misconceptions and stereotypes about Aboriginal Australia;
- four teacher-oriented videotapes ('Munyarl Mythology' which is also useful for introducing students to the facts that debunk some of the myths about Aboriginal Australia, 'Six Ways - Teaching Our Way: Successful Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies Activities for the Classroom', 'Inviting Culture Educators: The Benefits', 'Why Teach Aboriginal Studies?'); and
- a draft teacher-oriented 15 chapter introductory text entitled 'Understanding and teaching Indigenous Australian Studies' that also contains a wealth of historical and contemporary images that are excellent teaching resources in themselves.

Support resources, particularly the videotapes, have been found to be useful in all areas of teacher professional development and 'Munyarl Mythology' and 'Why teach Aboriginal Studies?' have been successfully used in Australian classrooms to instigate class discussion. An urgent need exists for an Indigenous Australian Studies teacher inservice package. It has been found that the 'Teaching the Teachers' resource material can be readily be adapted for this purpose.

Comments from student teachers clearly indicate that they appreciate the inclusion of this subject in the teacher education curriculum and the opportunity to learn that 'White Australia has a Black history'.

Thanks for inspiring and motivating me, changed my outlook on this subject.

Rhonda and Norm inspire teachers to become great teachers and to teach Indigenous Australian Studies.

This subject has really opened my eyes to Australia's real history. Before I took this subject I had not questioned my beliefs... I can now sympathise with their situation and their plight, prejudice and hardships.

It is about time that someone is finally teaching the truth about Australian history. This is exciting as well and worth the effort. Class participation is supported and challenges a lot of people's thoughts.

It was a great insight into 'Australian history'. It taught me a lot and inspired me to teach our children the truth about Aboriginal Studies.

This is a very important subject. It should be taught to all professional people as well as to the general community.

Student teachers from all trialing universities have demonstrated a commitment to teaching Indigenous Australian Studies in partnership with Indigenous communities and have learnt that the key process is learning from Indigenous people rather than about Indigenous people. These student teachers are already making a difference in the education system by proactively teaching Indigenous Australian Studies.

In 1995, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation provided a grant to reproduce all project materials with the exception of the text and distribute resources to every School of Teacher Education and every university Aboriginal Education Centre free of charge. Reproduction and distribution of these materials was completed in June 1996. The text is expected to be available in 1998.

Summary

'Evil can only triumph when good men/women choose to do nothing' (Walker and Noonuccal, 1991, p. 90). Indigenous Australian Studies and perspectives is an important area of study that has been historically ignored or treated in a superficial manner by the majority of Australian teacher education institutions. Core subjects in Indigenous Australian Studies are needed in teacher education courses to: a) teach undergraduate and graduate teachers how to understand and teach Indigenous Australian Studies effectively; b) ensure all Australian students are provided with an education that includes Australian history and an opportunity to appreciate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians' cultures; c) assist all Australians to live together in harmony; d) contribute to the process of reconciliation between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians; e) avoid structural prejudice by the

omission of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies and f) demonstrate teacher educators commitment to taking responsibility for the future by initiating curriculum reform.

'The great task ahead is the business of the future - the achievement of reconciliation through education' (National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1994, p.3). A long term key to social justice and the reconciliation process is effective teacher education so that all Australian students can be taught Indigenous Australian Studies by teachers who are appropriately educated. It is critical that core Indigenous Australian Studies and appropriate Indigenous perspectives be incorporated in preservice, postgraduate and inservice teacher education programs. "Australia is a much better place than it once was for Indigenous people but not as good as it might become" (Miller, 1996). It is hoped that the 'Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies' resources will provide a basis for teacher education institutions to begin to create their own core Indigenous Australian Studies subjects and thereby contribute to a more socially just Australia for all Australians.

References

Aboriginal Consultative Group. (1975). Aboriginal Consultative Group Report to the Commonwealth Government. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

ATSIC. (1994). Indigenous Australia Today. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Bourke, E., Dow, R., and Lucas, B. (1994). Teacher Education Preservice: Preparing Teachers to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students. Adelaide: Aboriginal Research Institute, University of South Australia.

Commonwealth of Australia. (1993). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Commonwealth of Australia. (1994). National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Canberra: AGPS.

House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Affairs. (1985). Report of the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education. AGPS: Canberra.

Johnstone, E. (1991). *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Miller, J. (1996). Quoted in the film 'Why teach Aboriginal Studies?' Sydney: University of New South Wales.

National Aboriginal Education Committee. (1986). *Policy Statement on teacher education for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*. AGPS: Canberra.

Schools Council. (1992). *Australia's teachers: An agenda for the next decade*. AGPS: Canberra.

Tickner, Robert (1991b). *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Bill*. Second reading by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister in Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon. Robert Tickner. Australian Government Publishing Service. Canberra: Australia.

Walker, D., and Noonuccal, O. (1991). *Terra Nullius-The Lie*. In Craven, R.G. and Parbury, N. (eds.) *Aboriginal Studies in the 90s: Where to now? Papers of the inaugural ASA conference, University of New South Wales, St George Campus, October, 89-95*.