A Case Study: Introducing and Teaching Core Aboriginal Studies

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This study seeks to contribute significant conceptual advances in theory, research and practice in primary teacher education. Broadly, the paper identifies institutional and course characteristics that contributed to the successful implementation of a core Aboriginal Studies subject into a primary teacher education institution in New South Wales. More specifically this study identifies: a) an institutions’ motives, values, and attitudes in relation to incorporating core Aboriginal Studies subjects in the primary teacher education curriculum; b) the impact of a core Aboriginal Studies course on pre-service teachers’ (n=5) values and attitudes, commitment and ability to understand and teach Aboriginal Studies to all Australian students and to teach Aboriginal students effectively; c) the institutional factors, course characteristics and personal experiences that final year preservice teachers (n=69) espouse as impacting on their values and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitment, to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students.

Introduction

It has long been recognised in numerous reports (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group , Report to the Commonwealth Government, (1975); Hughes, (1988); National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), (1993); Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), (1995); and National Report to the Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training , 2002) that teaching Aboriginal Studies to all Australian children is a first step in achieving Reconciliation, political reformation, and the recognition of collective rights, for all Australian people. Over the past decade an important change has taken place in a number of Australian primary teacher education institutions whereby they have begun to introduce core Aboriginal studies units into their undergraduate teacher education degrees. However, the nature and impact of these courses has not been ascertained by research.

The case study reported below aimed to identify: a) an institutions’ motives, values, and attitudes in relation to incorporating core Aboriginal Studies subjects in the primary teacher education curriculum; b) the impact of a core Aboriginal Studies courses on preservice teachers’ (n=5) values and attitudes, commitment and ability to understand and teach Aboriginal Studies to all Australian students and to teach Aboriginal students effectively; and c) the institutional factors, course characteristics and personal experiences that final year preservice teachers (n=69) espouse as impacting on their values and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitment, to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. In-depth interviews were undertaken with the Head of School of Education, the Director and past director of the Aboriginal Education Unit, 3 teacher educators, and 5 pre-service teachers. An open-ended survey was completed by final year student teachers (n=69). The discussion below identifies the experiences and challenges in one institution involved in the design and delivery of a core Aboriginal Studies unit to pre-service primary education teachers.

Context of the Case Study

The Institution

The institution is a large university with some 47 000 students. It is situated in the metropolitan area and draws students from NSW, across Australia and the world. The institution is structured around three over arching Colleges. The institution offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Primary teacher education is situated in the Faculty of Education.

The Introduction of Core Aboriginal Studies

From its inception, the core or mandatory Aboriginal Studies units of the primary teacher education degree has been taught almost exclusively by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal Studies began sometime in the early 1980s when the then Sydney Institute of Education (SIOE) established an Aboriginal Studies enclave, reportedly the first of its kind in NSW. The history of when the enclave was established was not known by
the staff at the institution interviewed as part of this case study. The Core Aboriginal Studies unit from SIOE was retained and incorporated into the institution’s Faculty of Education primary teacher education degree. Due to the philosophy underpinning the release of the mandatory NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) (NSW Department of Education, 1984 & 1996) with the added support of NATSIEP (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989), there seemed to be no obvious resistance to keeping the core Aboriginal Studies unit in the primary teacher education course within the new structure.

**The Aboriginal Education Centre**

The Aboriginal Education Centre has thus had a long and distinguished record in promoting equity of access, participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the institution. The block-mode program for Aboriginal Teaching Assistants began in 1975 and successfully attracted and retained large numbers of Indigenous students. Community needs, such as for fully qualified school teachers with an Indigenous specialisation, provided a powerful impetus for core Aboriginal Studies in primary teacher education. The Aboriginal Education Centre currently provides access, academic, cultural and personal support to Indigenous students while working to create a holistic learning environment in which they can optimise their learning. Another dimension to the Aboriginal Education Centre’s work is its integrated and inclusive approach to learning and teaching initiatives, which involves non-Indigenous staff and students contributing to a single, institution-wide strategic goal. That goal is to promote Indigenous learning, knowledges and perspectives across the whole institution.

Two-thirds of the academic staff are Indigenous, and act as mentors and role models for Indigenous students. Academic staff also play a strong leadership role in the wider institution in advising on curricula involving Indigenous issues and perspectives. They also provide an authentic voice while modelling culturally appropriate practices in learning and teaching.

**The Core Aboriginal Studies Unit**

While the core Aboriginal Studies unit of study remains situated in the Faculty of Education primary teacher education course, the teaching of the core Aboriginal Studies unit is coordinated by Indigenous staff from within the Aboriginal Education Centre. The coordinator has membership of the Faculty of Education primary teaching undergraduate committee to ensure that the Faculty processes and procedures are met. Hence, a strong working relationship has been built between the Faculty and the Aboriginal Education Centre.

As this subject is somewhat different to the pre-service teachers’ other units of study as at times it can be quite confronting, staff at the Centre felt it needed to be taught by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. This learning and teaching strategy presents a strong pedagogical model. The Indigenous staff member is able to draw upon individual experience as a teacher, whilst including stories from their life, their family and community. The non-Indigenous lecturer is seen as a role model who is able to encourage the pre-service teachers through their own learning and teaching practices to be as enthusiastic and motivated as they are, in teaching Aboriginal Studies.

In addition to their personal and cultural attributes, the academic staff are professionally astute in applying current research to their teaching activities. For example, established Indigenous learning and teaching practices, such as the use of story telling and oral history, are broadly located within newer theories of narrative inquiry. ‘Narrative inquiry’ is a western concept providing a theoretical framework that closely represents what Indigenous peoples have always done. The framework enables students to engage with knowledge on another (emotional) level, which can extend and deepen their learning. The use of symbols in Indigenous ways of learning is also drawn upon in the Centre’s pedagogy. As an example the Icon presentation is expanded on below. However, it is important to understand that these pedagogies make the pre-service teacher experience, in this core unit of study, somewhat different to other units within their course.
Teaching the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

The core Aboriginal Studies unit is currently taught in the second year of the primary teacher education course. It is a ten-week unit which is delivered by a combination of lectures and tutorials. Usually there is a one-hour lecture that presents the information on the topic to be covered in that week. This is then followed by a one-hour tutorial. The rationale for the unit is to ensure that, in line with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP), pre-service teachers are taught the impetus for including an Aboriginal Studies perspective into all of the Key Learning Areas.

The Aboriginal Study unit focuses on the relevance of teaching Aboriginal Studies in the primary school curriculum. The unit presents a contemporary education and cultural study that is linked to historical issues and interrelated social, policy and economic themes. The outline of the unit describes the learning outcomes and purpose of the study which is to: increase all students’ current level of knowledge in relation to Indigenous Australian issues; provide skills in the development and implementation of Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum and classroom practice; develop competence to critically evaluate resources for inclusion in Indigenous Studies programs; develop an understanding of the historical background of Indigenous Australians and how these experiences may impact upon their schooling; and develop skills that will create an inclusive learning environment in the classroom for Indigenous students.

Structure of the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

The following overview of the structure of the core Aboriginal Studies unit is taken from the Unit of Study Handbook, 2005.

Weekly Themes

Theme 1: Introduction / Indigenous History
An overview of the unit of study. Provides an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective on the history of Australia and the impact on Indigenous society.

Theme 2: Aboriginality and Identity
Explores the interplay between culture and identity and analyses the various constructions of Aboriginality. Discussion includes how these representations of identity have influenced both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’ views of what it is to be an Indigenous Australian. It encourages students to examine their own culture, beliefs, and values in relation to how these elements of the ‘self’ influence the way in which we view the ‘other’.

Theme 3: Race and Racism
The lecture traces the development of ‘race’ as a social and historical construct. It examines the consequences of its many manifestations in education. It also explores the barriers which work towards inhibiting student learning. The discussion examines how issues of racism, prejudice, and stereotypes impede the effective implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy. In addition it involves strategies, which contribute to the breaking down of these barriers.

Theme 4: History of Indigenous Education
The lecture explores the history of Aboriginal education in Australia, with specific focus on NSW. It focuses on links between the past and the present and how they influence learning and teaching in schools now and in the future.

Theme 5: What Works and What Else Works
The lecture discusses the “What works Program” which is a set of materials developed by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Sciences and Training (DEST) to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students, as well as examining and evaluating other relevant initiatives and resources.
Theme 6: The NSW Aboriginal Education Policy Review
The lecture looks at the importance of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy. The policy has just undergone a review and pre-service teachers need to be aware of the implications of this review.

Theme 7: Aboriginal Perspectives.
The lecture focuses on the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum. A guest speaker from DET is invited in to provide pre-service teachers with some practical ideas pertinent to the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom.

Theme 8: Indigenous Language and Learning
The lecture looks at how many languages were spoken across this land when Europeans arrived and how many are there now? What changes have taken place over the last two centuries and what implications does this have for teaching to and about Indigenous Australians? How does Aboriginal English differ from Standard English? These issues and relevant policies are looked at inline with the implementation of the new K-10 Aboriginal Languages syllabus.

Theme 9: Indigenous Health and Education
The lecture looks at the intrinsic links between Indigenous health and education. It is imperative that pre-service teachers are aware of health issues such as Otitis Media which impact on educational outcomes in the classroom. The status of Indigenous health examines some of the initiatives that have been developed to overcome these issues.

Theme 10: Working with Aboriginal Communities
This week Indigenous and non-Indigenous representatives from State and Federal education providers form a panel to explore and discuss the benefits and ways of forming partnerships with Indigenous communities. It also concentrates on the importance of consultation and collaboration as a process of incorporating Indigenous knowledges and input into the school.

Assessment

The Aboriginal Education Centre draws on the teaching and research expertise of its staff to ensure that its assessment processes are effective, appropriate and clear. It checks that the core units of study assessment processes reflect current thinking in pedagogy, and the University’s expectations in assessing students’ compliance with its generic graduate attributes.

The Academic Coordinator, in consultation with Course Coordinator, is responsible for the core Aboriginal Studies unit. The core unit of study is approved in the Faculties in which it sits, the Faculty of Education and Social Work. The core unit is subject to formal University approval mechanisms. Marking and assessment meetings are a regular agenda item at the Aboriginal Education Centre’s academic staff meetings.

There are currently three compulsory assessment tasks within the core unit, they are:

1: Icon presentation
This symbol activity is designed to share facets of the pre-service teachers’ lives and experiences with others, through an Indigenous framework, and includes the preparation of material for a presentation on some aspect of their life and family history. The students are required to give a five-minute oral account and describe the meaning of the symbols used. The exercise has its foundations in an Indigenous Framework and is based on Indigenous cultural practices where knowledge is communicated through symbols, and knowledge is shared as a gift, and not a right.

2: Journal
This assessment is considered an important part of the pre-service teachers’ learning. The reflective journal aims to engage students in a positive process by which there is a: clarity of meaning(s); conscious search for educational, political and moral significance; and dialogue, via the written word, between the students and the tutor (Ulalka Tur, 2001. p, 17). The journal is a record of the pre-service teachers’ reflections on the
topic/theme covered each week. The reflections are to be approached from a personal and an analytical perspective. Students include further resources and/or research that may be relevant, for example; newspaper clippings, radio broadcasts, television, art gallery information, archives and texts.

The journal is used to analyse and reflect upon the course readings and lecture/seminar content. The assessment task allows students to clarify their thoughts, help them to see the complexities of issues and to put things into perspective. The mode of recording encouraged is to be expressive, the style personal, free flowing, comfortable, and perceptive. It may include jottings; drawings, doodling, pictures and poems - or whatever students think best expresses their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the issues being presented throughout the core unit.

Holly and Smyth (1989, 2) suggest that, “Keeping a journal is not only a way of pondering upon questions, patterns and themes in one’s work, but it is a way of uncovering dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions so as to begin to resolve them”. Hence part of the journal writing process requires self-reflection not for the sake of ‘navel gazing’ but rather that some movement forward is achieved through the act of reflection.

3: 2000 Word Essay
The general aim of this academic essay is to deal analytically with the issues raised in the topic. The written work should demonstrate the pre-service teachers’ ability to present a reasoned argument. This means that after critical reading they are able to take a position on a topic or issue and argue for that position with the use of credible evidence.

*Essay Questions*

1. The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy (1996) states that all staff and students will have a knowledge and understanding of and respect for Aboriginal Australia. Discuss how you would achieve this goal at the classroom level and as a school wide strategy.

2. While Australian education systems have not always been beneficial for Indigenous people, positive changes have occurred over the last 25 years. Examine policy and practice instigated by State and Federal governments that have improved the educational outcomes of Indigenous students.

3. Education has been used as a tool for the colonisation of Indigenous Australians. Critically examine ‘race’ theory and the impact that it has had on the education of Indigenous Australians. Describe how you would, as a teacher, help to improve the “school relationship” for Indigenous students.

*Resources*

The Unit of Study Handbook is the pre-service teachers’ first resource. It contains the unit of study outlines with learning outcomes clearly articulated. The section on assessment is extremely detailed; as it not only describes the assessment item, but also gives a thorough explanation of the assessment criteria. In addition it sets out the rules and regulations which are to be followed and pertinent institutional policies, for example, The Academic Honesty Policy. Further, it includes a section on Language and Presentation, which recognises and values cultural diversity, and strongly advocates for fair representation of different cultural groups in contemporary society. The use of accurate and respectful language is a priority in the Centre’s learning, teaching, and research. Hence the students are asked to take serious note of the guidelines, particularly when writing essays and presenting tutorial papers. The guidelines include a description in relation to: Fair representation of Indigenous Nations and Individuals (students are directed to Craven (1996) ‘Using the right word in the Indigenous Australian classroom’, and (1999) ‘Teaching Aboriginal Studies’); Fair representation of Australian history (acknowledging inaccuracies such as ‘Captain Cook discovered Australia’); Fair representation of all people (in this section students are also directed to the institutions web site ‘Student and Staff Equal Opportunity Unit Language Guidelines’); and Spelling Referencing and Bibliographical Styles.

Human and material resources are critical in teaching the core unit. The core unit benefits from the experience of the academic staff involved in teaching and tutoring as well as the guest lecturers employed to present specific themes. In addition the Centre provides an up-to-day book of readings that can be purchased
from the institution’s Co-op Book Shop, with copies being made available both in the main library research stack and in the Aboriginal Education Centre library. The key aspect of the readings is that they have been compiled by a team of professionals who have had many years as teachers in the school system; are academics in the field; who have knowledge of state and federal policy; who maintain contact with a state wide network as well as local schools; and who have ongoing links with Indigenous communities. These readings are updated yearly, as one lecturer commented: we do not include a lot of readings, about 2 or three for each theme. But we do our utmost to find the best and latest readings on the topic; all students are expected to have read them prior to the lecture every week. In speaking with pre-service teachers at another institution, while undertaking this research, the pre-service teacher commented on how she had been lent a copy of these readings by a student at this institution, and how she had found the readings from this case study institution had helped her with her assignments.

This discussion has provided an evolutionary overview of the core Aboriginal Studies unit. The remainder of the case study now focuses on identifying areas of congruence and dissonance across the surveyed responses of the Head of School, Director and past director of the Aboriginal Education Centre and teacher educators; 5 students who had recently completed the Aboriginal Studies subject; and 69 students in the final year of their degree.

Participants

In-depth interviews were carried out with the Head of School of Education, Director and a past director of the Aboriginal Education Unit, 3 teacher educators (academic staff), and 5 pre-service teachers who had recently completed the Aboriginal Studies subject. The in-depth interview ranged from 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours in length. The interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed. An open-ended questionnaire was posted to all final year pre-service teachers. Unfortunately the response rate to the survey was very low, yielding only 12 responses. A second attempt was thus made to collect data. Contact was made with a lecturer in a compulsory final year subject who kindly agreed to let the researcher distribute the questionnaire and allowed time for the pre-service teachers’ to fill it out in the lesson. Approximately 95% of the students in attendance at the lecture filled out the questionnaire (n=69).

Results

Results: Rationale for Introduction of a Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

Academic staff were asked if they knew the official rationale behind why the institution had introduced a core Aboriginal Studies unit into the primary teacher education course. This question was asked to identify successful factors espoused as impacting on the successful development and implementation of a core Aboriginal Studies unit. None of the participants knew exactly when or how the core Aboriginal Studies unit had been introduced. Although one participant suggested that before a core Aboriginal Studies unit could be introduced certain pre-conditions must apply, and in the case of this institution, he thought that there were four main conditions.

One [reason] was the long association of the [Aboriginal Education] Centre with the University’s School of Education, this was evident in the ATA program and planning for the BEd. There was growing awareness in NSW in DET and AECG, of the need to inform teachers generally about culture and educational issues. Increasingly young teachers were connecting with Aboriginal children in classrooms. Further, teachers were expected to introduce appropriate content about Aboriginal culture across the curriculum. Thirdly, it was accepted wisdom that a good point to start with would be in the preservice education of primary school teachers, where an opportunity slot existed. And lastly it also needed individuals prepared to argue for the necessary diversion of resources, human and material. This is the case with all innovation – it involves commitment by individuals above and beyond existing duties.

Others proposed that the rationale for the introduction of the core unit was due to an increase in: numbers of Aboriginal students, awareness of the National and NSW Aboriginal Education Policies, and the importance of teaching Aboriginal history and culture, as illuminated below:
At a guess it would be in relationship to the national Aboriginal Policy and NSW Policy on Aboriginal education including history, knowledge, learning styles, pedagogy of Aboriginal students and issues like that.

The official rationale accepted that the condition of Aboriginal children in the school system presented a disturbing picture – low achievement and early graduation was standard. At the same time there were strategies employed by informed school personnel, which could improve the teaching of Aboriginal children, if teachers were more generally aware of Aboriginal culture and the needs of Aboriginal children at school. In part a bad situation could be alleviated if effective preservice teacher education was mounted. Adequate teacher education was seen as an important contextual element.

They [pre-service teachers] need to understand the issues involved firstly in Aboriginal education and how they can be ‘agent of change’ in the education system. How they can include Aboriginal perspectives into their classroom so that they can teach all students both Indigenous and non-Indigenous about the true history of this country.

Reflecting the comments by the academic staff, pre-service teachers’ similarly agreed that learning to teach Aboriginal students and Aboriginal history was a major factor promoting institutions to introduce a core Aboriginal Studies unit:

I think, not only for a better understanding of the background of the Indigenous students, but also just a better and broader understanding of Australian history and broader culture. I think it’s important that everyone going into the school, be open minded about the sorts of different children of different cultures and in particular, being in an Australian school, I guess it’s kind of expected of us from parents and from students that we’ve got an understanding of Australia’s history and Australia’s broader culture, which undeniably includes Indigenous issues and culture.

These sentiments were supported by another pre-service teacher who added another dimension to the importance for migrant pre-service teachers’ to be taught a core unit:

We get an understanding about what Aboriginal Studies is about and ... have Aboriginal students in a class or in the school, then we have knowledge about them. Also ... because I was not born in Australia, it increases my knowledge of Indigenous people and the culture.

These comments and the preliminary survey data from the open-ended questionnaires, suggest that the institutional motives, values and attitudes needed to introduce a core Aboriginal Studies unit into a primary teacher education course include: an awareness of the poor educational outcomes of Aboriginal students; a philosophical understanding of the rationale behind the formation of the National and NSW Aboriginal Education Policy; collaboration between the institution and community; and a strong commitment from dedicated individuals.

Results: Effectiveness of the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

The effectiveness of the core unit was explored by asking pre-service teachers to describe how well the institution taught the core Aboriginal Studies unit, and what had they learnt by participating in the core unit of study. This question was asked in order to ascertain whether what is espoused by institutions as valuable approaches to the teaching of core Aboriginal Studies unit is actually what is implemented. The overall responses were extremely encouraging with all responses from the in-depth interviews and 95% of responses from the final year pre-service teachers’ questionnaires, espousing positive experiences in the core unit as the following comments show:

The Aboriginal studies subject went well. It allowed us to get insights on the Aboriginal culture and different ways of teaching Indigenous kids.

The course was personally reflective. We had to think a lot about our own heritage.
Well – was challenging but not too confrontational. Concentrated on a broad balance of perspectives.

The unit was a real learning curve for me as being a migrant much of what I have learnt was from books written by white authors.

...I think it should be a core subject because most issues concerning history are written from a white perspective. There was so much to learn (shocking) I unlearnt previous perceptions from earlier readings.

I find that the workshops and the hands on sort of things work best, in regard ... cultural understanding, with any culture. I mean it’s quite easy to sit back and listen to someone talk about a culture, but until you can sort of, either research it and talk to others about it yourself, or do some sort of role play or hands on experience to do with the culture, it sort of like that thing... you don’t learn as much as doing something – you learn a lot more that way.

These responses suggest that by undertaking a core Aboriginal Studies course pre-service teachers have gained knowledge about Aboriginal culture and issues.

Other pre-service teachers viewed aspects of the core Aboriginal Studies unit negatively. Many felt that there was not enough time spent teaching how to teach Aboriginal Studies and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives.

In some ways I felt I did not learn anything practical.

I don’t think we were taught well at all...did not really give many practical examples.

Not much emphasis on teaching e.g. lessons, activities, resources etc.

The following comment encapsulates many of the participants’ sentiments regarding the lack of time for them to cover all of the subject matter in-depth.

We only did it for 10 weeks, I think it was a little rushed.

These concerns were reiterated by academic staff, who agreed that due to time constraints, there was little time to teach the pre-service teachers how to include Aboriginal perspectives or write lesson plans. They did however indicate that they spent considerable time covering community involvement and using the right resources.

A small percentage of pre-service teachers articulated negative comments in relation to the content and presentation of subject mater.

They treated us as though we had done some thing to them and we needed to make up for it.

Shocking! It was the most blatant “us v them” stereotyping I have ever been subjected to.

It seemed to me that we felt we were to blame for what happened to them and what is happening today. It seems that they took no responsibility for their own actions and after walking past x Street everyday I saw that they needed to be responsible for their actions too.

Still seems to be a subject that is taught because it “has” to be. Should be integrated into all other history learnt at school.

These negative views and attitudes of other pre-service teachers were commented on by one of the participants, who noted that:
This course was extremely beneficial. I know a lot of students had negative views/attitudes towards the subject matter; however that was due to a lack of interest on their behalf. A great and valuable course.

Negative comments indicate challenges for teacher educators in presenting a core Aboriginal Studies unit. It is also worrisome that these negative attitudes could be carried by pre-service teachers into the classroom. Such views present a real challenge for governments and teaching institutions both at the tertiary and school level. The occurrence of such negative views implies that the presentation of Aboriginal studies content needs to be sensitively delivered and also suggests the need for proactive policies and in-service programs within the school system to redress these negative attitudes.

Results: Impact of the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit on pre-service teacher commitment to teach Aboriginal Studies

Academic staff and pre-service teachers were asked what subject topics, and to what extent, does undertaking a core unit change the way pre-service teachers think about teaching Aboriginal Studies. This question was asked in order to identify successful core Aboriginal Studies units. In relation to the final year pre-service teachers, the question was asked to ascertain what aspects of the core unit had impacted positively and negatively on their values and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitment to teach Aboriginal Studies.

When asked to comment on the impact of the core unit on pre-service teachers the Director of the Aboriginal Centre reflected that:

Much depends on the quality of the course, the previous and present attitudes of the students and post-service experiences. Some students openly express their appreciation of the course, to lecturers. Other students are motivated to seek employment in schools with significant Aboriginal populations. Generally students are positive about their experience in course evaluations that we receive... We can say that the effectiveness of core Aboriginal Studies is in part captive to the limitations of teacher training. Core Aboriginal Studies does expose students to the issues of Aboriginal education from an Aboriginal perspective. What any one individual makes of this now or later cannot be predicted, but I believe that such studies can make a difference in a school setting. University education as a whole is predicated on the view that knowledge, skills and attitudes, can be transmitted and there’s centuries of experience backing this.

In broad terms, pre-service teachers indicated that the core unit addressed the areas of: history, culture and social problems in relation to Indigenous health and community as well as covering educational strategies such as using the right language, and being sensitive to other cultures. The extent of the broad areas covered in the core unit is encapsulated in the comments of this pre-service teacher:

I learnt about: the culture, policies, the history, language/learning, and how culture affects who you are.

Similarly, the pre-service teachers were positive about the impact of what they had learnt in the core unit:

Broader understanding of the overall cultural value of both students, parents and the community. An understanding of the expectations that each have of each other, in the educational context... the sorts of resources that are out there available to teachers and educators. And the different policies that inflict on everyday classroom sort of activities.

There may be significant benefits in doing the course for pre-service teachers who grow up not being exposed to Indigenous people and culture as this pre-service teacher indicates:

I’ll have to admit that like, growing up I could have been termed a bit of a racist kid, but in growing up over the later years of my school and in particular university, I’ve become a lot more aware of my surroundings and as such I can happily say that no way I’m racist any more. Because of the
sorts of encounters I’ve had through the personal life as well as through the courses I’ve been able to learn a lot more about Indigenous culture.

In relation to the institutional factors, course characteristics and personal experiences that final year preservice teachers espouse as impacting on their values and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitment, to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. Pre-service teachers commented that they had benefited from undertaking the core unit as most of their knowledge had been through the “media and what is seen and written in the newspapers”. A few pre-service teachers identified that they had done some Aboriginal Studies in their primary and secondary schools. An overwhelming number of participants described the most important impact on their values and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitment to teach Aboriginal Studies has been undertaking the core Aboriginal Studies unit.

The Indigenous education course, I don’t think I’d given it much thought before doing that subject and I’d say its probably had the biggest impact on my view of teaching Aboriginal Studies.

Our Aboriginal Studies course here at Uni has probably had the most influence as it really reinforced the importance of teaching Aboriginal Studies ... I learnt that Aboriginal Studies must be contextualised for it to be valued and effective. There is no use in including it in a programme if it is going to seem disjoined or tokenistic. Also, that Aboriginal students may come from a very different background i.e. family/household than most students and are often going to have different views about schooling i.e. they are used to independence and don’t give respect to teachers because they are [the] authority – you (as the teacher) have to earn it!

The Aboriginal Studies subject undertaken whilst at uni. This in the only exposure I have had that held any influence over how I would approach Aboriginal Studies.

Aboriginal Studies at the university has been the most significant influence as it is ultimately the only work I have done in this area.

Pre-service teachers who had taken the fourth year primary teacher education elective unit ‘Koori Kids in the Classroom’ felt that it had further developed their ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and students. In addition two other subjects, the Senior Arts subject and an Australian Music subject, were identified as contributing to pre-service teachers’ knowledge and skills to teach Aboriginal Studies and students. For example:

During my 2nd year of university I took a course about Australian music which dealt with Aboriginal music. My knowledge of Aboriginal culture was greatly enhanced through the examples I was given of Aboriginal music and its meaning.

One pre-service teacher noted the Aboriginal Studies core uni had affected his attitude of self:

The realisation that my views are old fashioned and ignorant towards Indigenous Australians.

The pre-service teachers also acknowledged the importance of visiting the Aboriginal Education Centre and utilising its resource library. Other important features of the core unit identified by pre-service teachers were: listening to elders, watching documentaries and films such as Rabbit Proof Fence, and course readings. In addition another important factor for pre-service teachers which they indicated influenced their attitude to teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students has been the opportunity to undertake a practicum in schools with Aboriginal students.

My first practicum at x. In my own school I never experienced Aboriginal education however I enjoyed it on prac.

I was able to experience practical teaching at x public school.

Having Aboriginal students in one of my prac classes.
Practicum – country school with high % of Aboriginal students.

In my last practicum, it was the first time ever I had an Aboriginal child… in my class. So because I was doing Rainforests as our Unit of work, I tried to bring in much of how the Aboriginal people lived in harmony with the rainforest as compared to that of the white invasion – in the name of progress. The students were allowed to see both sides of the picture.

Interestingly in responding to questions ascertaining the impact of the core Aboriginal Studies unit, final year pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of the core unit, but some of their comments were negative in relation to their perceived ability to teach Aboriginal Studies.

As much as I would like to become a teacher who covers a wide range in the curriculum and although I believe in the importance of teaching Aboriginal studies, I’m not confident in doing so due to lack of sufficient knowledge and ideas...Still not confident in teaching Aboriginal studies because insufficient knowledge and skills.

The subject was all theory and no practical ideas.

I think we need less talk about Aboriginal issues and more about how we can use things in the class.

I think I need more knowledge and skills to be able to teach Aboriginal studies in a school...not enough time to teach us about all that we needed to know. It was only a 10 week course, 2 hours a week, we cannot learn everything we need to know in such a small amount of time.

This pattern of responses has implications for the content and delivery of the core Aboriginal Studies unit. While the participants acknowledge the benefits of knowing about Indigenous history, race relations and educational policy and generally acknowledge a commitment to teaching Aboriginal Studies, they did not feel they had been taught sufficient classroom knowledge and skills to do so.

Conclusion

Strengths of the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

Several findings emerged from the interview data. The present investigation identified that most of the participants indicated that undertaking a core Aboriginal Studies unit of study had made a difference. It is clear from many of the pre-service teachers that the core unit was their first in-depth exposure to Aboriginal history and culture. This view was echoed by a migrant pre-service teacher who reported on how their knowledge had been transformed: The subject was a real eye opener and it provoked a lot of questions. Not only do these pre-service teachers know more about Aboriginal history and culture, they also have new understanding and insight into the state of Indigenous health and community issues.

Weakness of the Core Aboriginal Studies Unit

It is clear that the course was seen to attempt too much in too short a time. There appeared inadequate time to teach Aboriginal history which was separate from teaching strategies and educational issues. An increase in the time the core unit is taught, for example, an increase from a 1-hour lecture and a 1-hour tutorial to a 1-hour lecture and a 2-hour tutorial could address this issue, as would increasing the course to go over 2 sessions. Course strength is also about having highly professional staff that actively engage students in lectures and tutorials. Teaching core Aboriginal Studies certainly requires competent and sensitive practitioners to avoid any negative connotations being conveyed as indicated by some survey participants. As teachers are expected to implement the Aboriginal Studies policy in NSW schools, there are real challenges for both pre-service teachers who do not feel confident to teach Aboriginal Studies and institutions who aim to prepare them to do so.
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