

Teaching and Learning in an Indigenous Context

When involved in education with a group that includes indigenous students, consider that there may be more than one culture present. Different cultures have different ways of learning and communicating. For example, in many indigenous cultures it may be rude to ask many questions directly, to stare at them in the eyes, or to single someone out in front of a group. Consider the following tips:

- Avoid singling people out from a group, for whatever reason. Being singled out has been cited as a cause of “shame”. Even receiving an award at a school assembly is said to make the honoured one “shamed”, because they have been singled out. Group achievement at a task is however, a source of pride. Consider forming the class into small groups to collaborate on more complex issues, then reform as a larger group to share responses.
- Don’t use a rapid-fire questioning technique. This is not an appropriate way of asking for information in many aboriginal cultures. Instead it is necessary to show that you are prepared to listen to the response, and minimise the use of questions. Asking questions to which you already know the answer may be considered particularly strange.
- You could also, instead of asking a question directly, ask if anyone has a story to tell about a certain topic. This because narrative is a form of giving and asking for information in some cultures. The narrative may not lead up to a dramatic climax, but bump along from event to event: this is a particular form of narrative specific to Indigenous culture and therefore shouldn’t be negated.
- Consider that everyone is still improving their knowledge of English, and some people might be doing this with English as a second language. Talk slowly, use easy to understand words, employ facial expressions, intonation, body language and hand actions, but don’t feel you have to simplify the issue. Consider using some Aboriginal English speech patterns, or local language words, in order to develop rapport, help everyone feel included, and that their way of speaking is accepted as equal. Consider employing an interpreter to translate and back translate to ensure concepts are understood.
- Don’t correct anyone’s English – it’s not your job and its not helpful to your goals of developing rapport and encouraging people to speak.
- Give extended time to respond to questions. In many Indigenous cultures it is considered polite to think about what people have said, then think about your response, before you reply. Translating back and forth from native to second language may also be occurring during this process. This extended time before response is uncomfortably long for many Euro-Australians, but to talk again before giving adequate time to respond is considered rude, like you are not interested in what the other has to say. A complicating factor here is that it is not considered compulsory to answer questions in many Indigenous cultures, unlike in Euro-Australian culture, where one must reply, even with an evasion, and to ignore a question is quite rude.

- It also helpful to state at the beginning of the session that everyone is free to ask questions of you. This makes concrete your point of view on questions, and also lets people know where they stand in relation to knowledge acquisition: in many Indigenous cultures, there are areas of knowledge that are only “knowable” by certain people, like women’s business is only for women. If you don’t make clear that fact that the knowledge you have is public knowledge, and then don’t recognise when someone is asking for more information because of the indirect way of asking, the asker may assume that area of knowledge is secret, that they are not supposed to know, and may not try to know about that issue again.
 - For example, linguists asked in a certain community whether a person spoke a certain language. The person responded that they did not, and the linguists concluded that that language was not spoken in that community. Actually, the person asked did understand that language, but
 - the language was not the language of her clan, so she did not have the right to speak it,
 - Even members of the appropriate clan group would not have answered that they knew the language, as they were not the “managers” of that language; like the appropriate media relations person to contact about information about that language.
- A person is responsible for the knowledge they know, so if they tell someone who then uses it for the wrong purposes, they may get in trouble. Therefore, knowledge is only passed on to appropriate people, when they are deemed ready for it and for the responsibility of maintaining that knowledge and passing it on responsibly.
- Consider multiple learning strengths: explain difficult concepts from several angles. Use recurrent Aboriginal learning strengths, e.g. giving lesson overviews to situate the lesson in the overall context, use contextualised rather than abstract concepts, use visual aids and hands-on activities, demonstrate tasks before expecting others to work on them, and use group work and stories to help people understand.
- Assess who is listening by their spoken responses, not by whether they are looking at you, and sitting still, not fidgeting. Eye contact means different things in Indigenous cultures; from a challenge to sexual flirtation.
- Don’t force anyone to do something they don’t want to do – even if it seems silly, such as joining a particular group – many Indigenous cultures have ‘poison relationships’, where two people related in a particular way have limits on they way they interact. For example,
 - husbands might leave the room, or not speak, when their mother in law is present. Likewise, men should not speak to the man that initiated them.
 - during the process of being taught certain secret knowledge, the learner should not speak to certain people.
- Set aside time for developing your personal relationship with participants and getting to know them and their community. This is important to understand what will work in that community. It is also important in order to let the community members develop their relationship with you in order to feel comfortable about sharing knowledge with you.

- The participants will also probably be to some extent bi cultural, in western and indigenous culture. I remember being all prepared to work with some Aboriginal health workers using their cultural cues; less direct eye contact, avoid direct questions etc, and found that they had come prepared to meet me using my cultural cues: very direct eye contact, firm handshake, firing off questions etc. That was a bit confusing for a while! Watch and listen to see to what extent the students are bicultural, eg use of eye contact.