

TRUTH TELLING WITH A/PROF GEOFF GINN

Voiceover

Welcome to “Indigenising Curriculum in Practice” with Professor Tracey Bunda and Dr Katelyn Barney.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Hi everyone, I’m Tracey Bunda and welcome to our podcast series Indigenising Curriculum in Practice. I’m a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and the Professor of Indigenous Education at The University of Queensland.

I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging Country and the various Countries from where our listeners are located and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge the ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to society at local, national and international levels.

I’m joined by my colleague and co-host Dr Katelyn Barney.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Hi everyone. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are recording, and also where you are listening from, and pay my respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong connections to Country. I also want to acknowledge that where we are recording has always been a place of teaching and learning.

I’m a non-Indigenous woman living and working in Meanjin.

In this series Tracey and I interview Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they are Indigenising curriculum within the Faculties at the University of Queensland.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Together we are going to ask questions to unravel the why, the how and the when of Indigenising Curriculum.

Dr Barney

Our theme for this episode is based on the principle of truth and our guest today is Associate Professor Geoff Ginn from the School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry at the University of Queensland. Welcome, Geoff.

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

Thank you.

Prof Bunda

Can you introduce yourselves in whatever way is comfortable for you?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

I’m a historian at UQ. I’m the current history convenor. My own background is in a number of different historical fields – I work in public history, also urban history, and British and Colonial history, so as an enthusiastic history student, I just kept studying and got to the end of the road and got a job.

Dr Barney

How did you become interested in including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the history curriculum?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

Well, it's always been an important theme in the Australian history that we teach. Our school, our department, in the '60s and '70s really led the country in understanding the historical significance of frontier violence, so, people like Kay Saunders, Ray Evans, Clive Moore, Henry Reynolds, and more recently, Jonathan Richards – there's a whole lot of people attached to history departments in Queensland and also at UQ who have really kind of pushed this idea of what Reynolds called "the other side of the frontier", you know, the idea there's another story about colonisation that people just weren't aware of.

My own research was in British history but as I got further into my 20s, trying to make my PhD last longer, I started working as a cultural heritage consultant, so it was really in my mid-20s that I first started to work with the history of frontier violence in particular and that was coming about as a result of working with an archaeological firm, and we'd do regional surveys, we'd do cultural heritage studies, we'd do oral history projects, we did research for native title claims, we looked at the history of sites and massacre sites and archaeological evidence and so on. I had a really interesting lot of work in the mid-90s onwards in that cultural heritage space so that's when I really woke up to the current need for a genuine conversation in Australia public life about the meaning of this colonial history, understanding it better and also getting more people to understand the historical record, and then also having a more fully-fledged conversation about what it all means today.

So, I think that was my own background and then we've gone through a number of reforms in the history curriculum; we've had an opportunity to produce more and more contemporary modes of teaching, and more contemporary issues and topics in history, and one of them is better understanding the nature of the implications of Australia's colonial history for Australians today and so that's where in recent years this whole push towards Indigenising the curriculum around getting towards outcomes that our students need to be able to understand, having that embedded in the classroom.

Prof Bunda

One of the principles developed as part of the UQ Indigenising curriculum design is truth; truth-telling centres Indigenous voices in curriculum, truth and truth-telling can also be a contested matter. What Indigenous histories do you want your students to know and understand in relation to truth-telling in the curriculum that's offered?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

The whole question of truth is a central one for historians; it's a very tricky historical concept because historical truths – there are such things as historical truths, but there's also different kinds of truths. You know, there's objective truths, there's moral truths, there's poetic truths, there's emotional truths – there's lots of different ways that you can think about a truth might work for someone. As someone teaching history students, what I would like to see is people understanding that history is at its most interesting and its most relevant when we can put as much complexity and nuance into it as possible.

I often say to students that “If you give us the obvious answer in writing an essay, it’s probably not going to be a very good essay. You’ve got to find ways to explore the depth and complexity” and that comes to truth as well which in my sense, in my thinking, I would say a truth is an interpretation about the past that we can agree upon based on the evidence, and based on our understanding of the historical record. Now, that doesn’t mean everyone has to agree with it but it’s arguable and we can find common ground in agreeing with it. So, for instance, there used to be an assumed truth that Australia was colonised, broadly speaking, peacefully. That was a false truth, you know, it’s an error, it’s a historical error. We now understand that record better, we now understand the evidence for sustained frontier violence and ongoing conflict better and so now we would say our agreed truth is that the colonial frontier was a place of violence, it was a place of suffering, and it was a place of ongoing intergenerational trauma, and historians would agree with that. That is now the agreed historical truth, but making that nuance and that complexity understood more broadly, so it’s not just academic historians or people with an existing interest in the subject, it’s actually something that’s relevant to all Australians and that’s what coming to terms with our past really means.

And I think without that, reconciliation is a very distant ambition until we can actually come to terms with the truths of our past.

Dr Barney

You’ve developed supervised research projects for third year undergraduate students to work on Indigenous-related topics, and students get the opportunity to use the State Library collections and it’s linked with the Path to Treaty themes including truth-telling – can you talk a bit about that assessment item and the projects and how you’ve made that partnership with the State Library?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

Yes, I’ve had a great relationship with the State Library for years; I think they’re wonderful, professional people to work with, and the collection is obvious a very rich collection of Queensland’s social, cultural, political history. It’s a bit different to an archive though; it’s an actual State Library collection and so the material is often collected from more personal sources, it’s often photographs, and letters and documents, and images that are collected in a more haphazard way. It’s not a formal archive like you find at the State Archives for instance. A lot of the really important ground-breaking research on frontier violence, to use that as an example, came from Jonathan Richards working at the archives, and it’s a very systematic archive – you’ve got to work through it very systematically.

But the State Library has a very rich and diverse collection with lots of holes in it but also lots of stuff that people haven’t really explored in any detail. So, over the years, I’ve had students working at a third year level – we have a third year Capstone course that is called History in Action and it’s an independent research project where they take a topic of their own interest and they explore it, developing a research output which is not an essay. That’s the one thing we say – it can’t be an essay, it should be a website, or a documentary, or an audio-visual film, or some of them make boardgames, sometimes it’s an academic article, sometimes it’s a whole range of different formats that the students have chosen and to work on.

The richness of the State Library collection means that they can find something that hasn’t really been very well-explored, and take their research to a really detailed level which

students are really excited about, and because the State Library has been so proactive in the Pathway to Treaty process, you know, is a lead agency in the Queensland arts and cultural sector, my existing kind of relations with them meant it was pretty straightforward to talk to the right people about how we can have students come in and use the archives, use the collections, and develop these undergraduate student projects in a way that explores the kinds of historical questions that are going to be essential in that Pathway to Treaty.

So, it's only in the last two or three years we've been working on this and last year we had three students go and do different kinds of projects relating to language salvage and retention, relating to Indigenous pathways in the landscape. Another student was really interested in labour history and wrote a wonderful project on the Palm Island strike of 1957. So, if they've got a particular interest in labour history, you know, they can do that kind of theme, but the idea is that year by year we'll sort of tease out the strengths of that State Library collection and we'll bring out student projects that explore some of the depths of that collection and bring out some of the unknown kind of elements to it.

And the State Library is also very good at having John Oxley Library posts and blogs and so on so that there's a medium there for people to communicate their research as they're doing it. So, yes, it's early days but it's been really promising.

Dr Bunda

That sounds like great work. Do you think these research projects have the potential to lead students to understand those notions of truth that you were talking about previously, and have there been challenges for the students?

Geoff Ginn

One of the issues with third year students projects, and it's just a fact of life, the students are of variable ability; sometimes they take on more than they can chew, and sometimes they're a bit tentative in getting started, and other times they're overly ambitious, you know. And also at times – and I think this is universal – they're often quite unsure about the steps involved so our job is to scaffold that into a system and to work through the various challenges involved. But I think by choosing to do a project focused on this theme, this theme of Indigenous perspectives, Pathway to Treaty, coming to terms with Queensland's past, investigating the legacies of that past in the present, considering what it means for intergenerational equity and so on, a whole range of things they could potentially explore as a dimension to their project, inevitably they've got a richer and deeper understanding at the end of the project, no matter how well it turns out or otherwise.

So, for example, if a student is interested in the landscape, and what the landscape, the values that were intrinsic in the landscape in terms from an Indigenous perspective, and how that related to the colonial acquisition of territory, the imposition of colonial ways of life and colonial ideas of property and so on, even just by teasing that out in a case study, a student is going to actually understand more about that idea of connection to Country and what dispossession means and what that continues to mean. So, even in... it's a 3,500 word project that they do in third year, but that's a reasonable length research study; you can start to unpack your case study in reasonable detail I think, and I think the challenges do relate to the ambition involved because it's not easy material to work with, and students are often quite idealistic and want to seize this opportunity and so something amazing so you've sometimes got to remind them it's not a PhD – it's a third year project that might lead on to an honours degree next year, you know, if you want to do it that way, but the main thing is to

make it manageable so that you land, after three-and-a-half months, you land with a finished project that you can then submit.

So I think the main challenge is that scaffolding thing; it's not about encouraging them to think outside the box; they're ready to do that and they're ready to explore things that can be considered challenging or, you know, sensitive or difficult – they're quite ready to explore that kind of territory.

Dr Barney

I really liked how the assessment, the research output, could be something different like an audio-visual output or a boardgame – something interesting. You kind of touched on it then but what are the ethical considerations that you think students need to take consideration of during those projects?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

Yeah, there's quite a practical dimension to this in that there's a bit of a grey area around undergraduate students doing oral history projects, for example, there is a clear ethics approval process for honours level and above, but these were independent projects being done at the third year level by undergraduate students. And I would love nothing more than to simply go out and sit down and talk to people, you know, actually meet someone from community, meet someone who's a traditional owner, meet someone who's got a family story to tell, and have the student just sit down and talk it through with them. In many ways that's perfectly doable, but it's also there's a question here about where is the student going with this research, what will the ultimate tone of the research be, what sort of questions will it probe, will it prove to be something that becomes more challenging than we expect, is it something... so, you know, there's legitimate reasons for caution as well.

I think the ethics in a university undergraduate environment can be kept manageable as long as you keep the human connection to a minimum, and that's kind of a shame really, you know that you're ending up not having that human connection in order to make the project manageable. So, we try and walk that line a bit; we need to be aware of our obligations to conduct ethical research according to the guidelines, but we can also model that to our students and we can encourage our students to talk to people, to sit down and have chats and to sort of, you know, get to know the field and get to understand things from another perspective but not to make that data collection in a technical research sense because that would require ethical clearance. So, I'm trying to maintain that human connection where it's possible without turning it into a data collection exercise that would need research ethics clearance.

Prof Bunda

Thanks, Geoff. The podcast is called "Indigenising Curriculum in Practice". What does that mean to you in relation to teaching and learning, and particularly Indigenising curriculum in history?

A/Prof Geoff Ginn

It means getting Indigenous voices into the curriculum, and that's not just Indigenous staff members; that's obviously really important – it's being able to draw in to the complexity of historical material we work with, deepening and enriching the range of material so that there is a fair representation of what you might call "subaltern voices" which is what's often used in historical theory to describe voices from... you know, if you think about history often

being a question of power hegemonically applied, well voices from below, resisting that an agency from below, resisting that is a subaltern voice, and I think in the Australian environment, and the Australian sources, we've got an ample richness of Indigenous perspectives in the documentary evidence that we can draw out from the historical record and bring into the classroom via teaching materials, assigned readings, chapters in textbooks, consider this, consider that, you know, and actually talk students through the process of thinking actively about different perspectives because people have agency and people have an emotional life, and people respond to deprivation and disadvantage and injustice in a whole lot of different ways, and we've got to pay due respect to that richness of human response I think, but I think that's something that history is well-suited to.

Prof Bunda

And I think that's a great strategy for those who are listening and wondering how they can do this work and bringing that Indigenous voice to the space is really critical. Thank you.

Dr Barney

Thanks, Geoff. It's great to hear about how you're Indigenising curriculum in history and also the partnership with the State Library. Thanks for joining us for another episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice, and we hope you can join us next time.

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