

Relationships with Francis Nona and Dr Preetha Thomas

Voiceover

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

Prof Tracey Bunda

Hello, 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 for Indigenous Education at the University of Queensland. It has been my responsibility to lead Indigenisation of the curriculum as a key activity of the UQ Reconciliation Action Plan, and 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 Barney

Hi everyone. I’m Katelyn. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we’re recording, and pay my respect to the ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong connections to Country, and I also want to acknowledge that where we’re recording has always been a place of teaching and learning. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country, and in this series, Tracey and I are interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they’re Indigenising curriculum through a look at case studies across the faculties at the University of Queensland.

Our theme today for the episode is based on the principle of relationships, and our guests today are Francis Nona and Dr Preetha Thomas from the School of Public Health at the University of Queensland. Welcome.

Dr Preetha Thomas

Thank you.

Mr Francis Nona

Thank you.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Can you introduce yourselves in whatever way you feel comfortable?

Francis Nona

Ngau nel Francis Nona. Ngai descendant belong Saibai Island Torres strait. Ngal clan, Dhoeybaw Clan, Ngai Aith Kadal Malu baitham Pikinnki/Kazi belong enub ngau totem Mina kaima esso nitha mura inna munu viting manning. Thank you for having me. My name is Francis Nona, and I’m a descendant from Saibai Island Dhoebaw clan, and my totems are the Aith Kadal and Malu Baitham which is the shark and crocodile, and I’m so excited to be here, talking about Indigenising curriculum.

Dr Preetha Thomas

My name is Preetha Thomas. I live and work on Jagera and Turrbal land and I'm a lecturer in the School of Public Health. I lecture in public health nutrition and it's an absolute pleasure to be part of this podcast. Thank you.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Thanks Preetha and Francis. Can you talk a bit about how you're Indigenising curriculum in the School of Public Health?

Francis Nona

Indigenising curriculum is a concept that's so important to make sure that we are contributing to Closing the Gap with First Nations health. I do it everywhere that I can. I came through the Masters of Public Health and I saw how there was such a need to actually have the embodiment of knowledge within curriculum. Since finishing my Masters of Public Health, I worked in this project and I just saw every opportunity to embed knowledges, and I think there's one way to embed knowledge, but there's another way to legitimise those knowledges within these curriculum developments, so, I brought in the way that we could legitimise it.

Prof Tracey Bunda

One of the design principles developed as part of the UQ Indigenising Curriculum principles is relationships and Ambelin Kwaymullina writes that "equitable partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are vital to the success of any Indigenisation project". Can you talk about your partnership, and the relationships you've developed to be able to Indigenise curriculum in public health?

Francis Nona

I would wholeheartedly agree that where it starts is relationship; if we don't have the relationship to actually work together on the importance of Indigenising curriculum, then we don't have a platform to actually embed those knowledges. I think of instantly the cultural interface that Nakata writes about and it's finding that middle ground to [1] to understand that there is another knowledge system, but [2] you don't participate in the other; you meet at the middle ground and you stay at the middle ground, and that middle space is relationship building.

Dr Preetha Thomas

For me, that relationship building was definitely an embodied real space as well, building and sustaining that relationship in a respectful manner has gone a long way towards us doing this work.

Dr Katelyn Barney

As part of the design principles, Tracey talks about how Indigenising curriculum taught by non-Indigenous teachers needs to be in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders. Could you talk a bit about how you think that can be done in health-related courses?

Francis Nona

When I think of health-related courses, and Indigenous health, and Indigenous knowledges, that partnership is that very essence of relationships. By having those relationships when we deliver content, it brings in the understanding as I am not external to that content as an Indigenous man, where our non-Indigenous educator can be external to it which doesn't make it relational for students to understand the true complexities within the knowledges and the issues that Indigenous people face. Working alongside and with Indigenous academics and

knowledge holders actually brings that to the forefront; it gives the understand to the students as we are in it, we are not external to it – we're a part of this. I think this is an important aspect to working with, as opposed to working on.

Dr Preetha Thomas

Within public health courses, because we apply an equity lens, and we like to look more broadly about health, and this knowledge being imparted like Francis said, from the perspective of Indigenous peoples who have those lived experience, makes it a much more worthwhile experience for students as well as for non-Indigenous academics working in this space and learning from Indigenous academics.

Prof Tracey Bunda

Brooke Collins-Gearing and Rosalind Smith used the metaphor burning off of Country in relation to Indigenising curriculum. They state by burning off the central pedagogical philosophy and purpose employed in our Indigenised mainstream English course is to clean up the landscape so that new, transformative possibilities may grow. I ask you both how do you think we need to “burn off” the discipline of health?

Francis Nona

I love that concept of “burning off”. I can't help but think burning off is dismantling the system of the one way it's always been seen, and health, in aspects, is viewed differently than non-Indigenous people, so having the burning off concept is dismantling these dominant paradigms in the way that we view health. And I think we really have to get into a place of that equilibrium space of accepting that Indigenous people see Indigenous health differently, so let's burn off this majority way of being and start accepting that we come at the cultural interface.

Dr Preetha Thomas

I too draw on Martin Nakata's work when he talks about needing a reconceptualisation of the intersection between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, and allowing for that to work much better but also for students and staff who are learning alongside to negotiate a new set of meanings and reinterpretations of those meanings as well where there's acknowledgement and equity for Indigenous knowledges in high education spaces and an acknowledgement of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies as well in teaching. And I think that's where that “burning off” needs to come in stages.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Thanks Preetha and Francis, I really like that metaphor of “burning off” as well in terms of changing the discipline.

Obviously curriculum development takes time and it's specially the case when teaching areas can be in an areas where an academic might not have prior familiarity or limited knowledge, so, can you give any advice on where you think non-Indigenous academics should start in the health field in relation to Indigenising curriculum?

Dr Preetha Thomas

I can talk from my perspective of being a non-Indigenous academic; learning from Indigenous leaders was really important in that space, and personally, from a practical note, I think doing the AIATSIS core modules, all 10 of them, was phenomenal in how it transformed my understanding. That actually led me to seek out more sources of truth rather

than relying on dominant existing literature and the wrong history out there. That was what grounded me and I think brought me along on this journey, and wanting to share that with other non-Indigenous academics as well. That would be my starting place I think, and also that distinction, Tracey, that you have covered so beautifully in the Green Paper, the distinction between Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous perspectives, and Indigenous studies. I mean, I can deliver Indigenous perspectives, but that's my perspective of something that I've read; it's my interpretation whereas if it's content that is delivered by Indigenous knowledge holders, given the respect and the acknowledgement, I think that's where true learning comes from.

But having that humility to accept that that is learning that needs to be done by all non-Indigenous academics, whether they've lived in Australia for ever, or they're a relative newcomer like me.

Francis Nona

Also, I think for non-Indigenous academics, in my language I'll say [language 0:11:34] which means, "Listen with your ears – there is content that we can, together, deliver within curriculum", and not come in with that dominant paradigm of "I know what content this is. I'll deliver it the way I feel" – just listen, you know, that's deep listening; listening to beyond what's said.

Dr Preetha Thomas

"Deep listening" - I think when Francis said that, that was something which I believe in deeply, especially after learning from Francis and colleagues in Indigenous leadership, but also that critical reflexivity which each of us need to engage in to make sure that we are doing the right thing the right way, but otherwise ask for help if you need to.

Prof Tracey Bunda

You're obviously both very passionate about the work that you've been doing in the public health space. This podcast series is called "Indigenising Curriculum in Practice" – is there any other message that you want to give to anyone who's listening to this series, and is going to start working in that Indigenised curriculum space?

Francis Nona

I see curriculum as an extension of knowledge to a workforce. So, when we think broadly as educators, "How do I impact the workforce culturally, respectfully", and understanding it's done at the curriculum level, we need to, as educators, realise that what we do with students, those students will be working with our people so we have to get it right at the curriculum level, otherwise we are still trying to close the gap with people not understanding how it's created.

Dr Preetha Thomas

I think for me, the word "embedding" says a lot because I think it's about normalising the curriculum rather than an add-on and a tokenistic approach which I think that seems to be the default setting. It takes time, it takes you need to be in a space of discomfort, it's not always a safe space but there are always safe hands holding you, I've found – that was my experience.

Dr Katelyn Barney

Thank you. We've been talking to Francis Nona and Dr Preetha Thomas. Thanks so much for sharing your experiences. It was great to hear about how you're Indigenising curriculum in the School of Public Health, and thank you for joining us in this episode of "Indigenising Curriculum in Practice". We hope you can join us for another episode.

[End of recording]