

## INTERVIEW WITH REN PERKINS AND KATE MCLAY MASTER

### **Voiceover**

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

### **Prof 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. It has been my responsibility to lead Indigenisation of the curriculum as a key activity of the UQ Reconciliation Action Plan. 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’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we’re recording, and pay my respect to their ancestors and their descendants. 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. In this series, interview Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they’re Indigenising curriculum through a look at case studies through the faculties at the University of Queensland.

### **Prof Bunda**

For the purposes of this podcast, “Indigenisation of Curriculum” is defined as incorporating Indigenous content into the curriculum. Together, we’re 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 benefits, and our guests today are Ren Perkins and Dr Kate McLay from the School of Education at the University of Queensland. Welcome, Ren and Kate.

### **Prof Bunda**

Would you mind to introduce yourselves in whatever way is comfortable for you? Ren, you want to go first?

### **Ren Perkins**

My name is Ren, Ren Perkins. I am a Quandamooka man and I also have connections to Wakka Wakka Country. Just before we start, I just want to pay our respects to the traditional owners of where we are today, the Turrbal and the Jagera people. Thanks for having us and sharing our stories with you.

### **Dr Kate McLay**

And I'm Kate McLay. I'm a white woman, I'm living and working here in [0:02:32] and I'm a member of the "Embedding Indigenous Perspectives portfolio, the Teaching and Learning Committee at the School of Education and have just recently taken up a role as Director of Indigenous Engagement, and I'm a lecturer in the School of Education in Secondary English and Literacy.

### **Dr Barney**

Can you talk a bit about the process of Indigenising curriculum in the School of Education?

### **Dr Kate McLay**

Well, about 18 months ago, an Embedding Indigenous Perspectives portfolio was established as part of the Teaching and Learning Committee, with the goal of supporting and leading staff in the School of Education to integrate Indigenous perspectives into all of our courses and programs. I was part of that along with Professor Katie Makar and Dr Steph McMahon and this year, Ren, and Dr Jodie Miller have both come on board as well. We didn't launch straight into doing; we spent some time exploring and trying to build a shared understanding of what Indigenising curriculum means in the School of Education and what it might look like. We really wanted to avoid a box-ticking exercise, but find authentic and meaningful ways of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into our practice.

So, we started by talking really, and reading, and listening, we explored resources like UQ's RAP and the Indigenising Curriculum Green Paper, we sought out the views of our Indigenous colleagues, Associate Professor Marnee Shay and Dr Danielle Armour, and we were really lucky to spend a few hours yarning with Auntie Denise Proud about the role of the portfolio, and we all came away from that with a much richer understanding of some of the principles we'd been exploring like building authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples and not just transacting, or asking questions, and expecting Indigenous peoples just to hand over their knowledge.

We also came away feeling like it was okay for us to move forward thoughtfully and consultatively as we built our own cultural competence, and that gave us a greater sense of confidence, and once we felt like we had that bit more confidence from reaching out to Aboriginal colleagues and Elders, as well as a better sense of the values and principles, we then did some more practical things which I think Ren is going to talk about.

### **Ren Perkins**

In terms of some of the practical things, the School of Education has a newsletter that comes out once a week. We've, as part of the Teaching and Learning Embedding Indigenous Perspectives portfolio, we've contributed to some of the content that goes out every week; it just informs all the staff in the School of Education – programs like the First Scientists, things like the Australian Wars that have just recently been on SBS – we can actually share those links on that newsletter, and then anything that's happening within the university, like the events that were happening with Reconciliation Week and upcoming with NAIDOC. We share that through the newsletter that goes through the head of school – that's just a practical way that we can help support. Not all that load is on us as the Indigenous staff that we want all the staff to come with us.

Another practical thing that we've done is we've had one session so far with some other staff within the school, and it was about just sharing with them some of our ways that we go about embedding Indigenous perspectives. It wasn't structured; it was just a yarning session. We

spoke about some of the resources that we used, how we go about planning out ECPs – that's Electronic Course Profiles – and we had a pretty good turn-up for our first one, and it's just going to be ongoing and it's going to continue to be informal.

### **Prof Bunda**

Sounds like a great program. One of the design principles developed as part of UQ's Indigenising Curriculum is benefits. Would you mind to talk to us a little about the benefits of this process of Indigenising the curriculum in Education? That's my first question, and my second question is what are the benefits to the students, like those practical examples you were talking about obviously benefits to staff but we're thinking what are the benefits to students?

### **Ren Perkins**

In terms of the school as teacher educators, we're actually in a really unique position – it's really a privileged position that we get to educate future teachers. We have a huge responsibility in those kind of values, those morals, those ideals that we want them to then display as teachers, and working with their young students and those young people. So, there's a lot of responsibility on us, working with pre-service teachers, and I think that's where the principles of embedding Indigenous perspectives is so important; it's not only saying it's important, it's about how we go about doing that, demonstrating that, being role models for those pre-service teachers, giving things that they can then work towards when they're in the classroom.

And then from my perspective, as an Indigenous man, in terms of Indigenising the curriculum, for me it's about, well, how our students can see ourselves within the curriculum, because the curriculum has not historically been written for us, and by us, so we want to be able to see us in the curriculum. In terms of Indigenous students, that's why it's so important that we continue on this path of embedding Indigenous perspectives.

### **Dr Kate McLay**

I think for non-Indigenous students, recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems alongside Western systems is really enriching. We gain connection to Country and to ancient cultural practices and wisdoms. We have a lot to learn about ourselves and about one another, and about this country that we all live in together, and our learning is impoverished I think if we don't embrace Indigenous knowledge systems as well. So, I think non-Indigenous students benefit hugely from gaining access to these ancient knowledges and practices. In thinking about this question, I think about the work of Professor Peter Renshaw, and Dr Ron Tooth and their team who have been doing really beautiful research into the ways that drawing on Indigenous ways of understanding connectedness to place, can help children develop a sense of ethical care and responsibility for the more than human world – the environment, creatures, ecosystems, and at a time when we are increasingly aware of the impact of climate change, learning from Indigenous peoples' knowledge of Country and sense of belonging to Country rather than Country belonging to us to do with as we will, is a really valuable way of developing understandings of our interconnectedness with place, with one another, with the past, with those who will come after us, and I think that helps us to make better, more sustainable choices now and for the future. That's just one way I see benefits.

### **Ren Perkins**

The work that Professor Peter Renshaw is doing is out at Greenbank Primary School. It's really important but in terms of a personal connection, my daughter is teaching a Year 5 group which is part of the cohort that Peter is working with – as an Indigenous teacher, she's seeing the benefits of embedding Indigenous perspectives, the great work that Peter's doing, and incorporating those Indigenous knowledges.

### **Dr Barney**

Another possible benefit of Indigenising the curriculum is about building the capacity of non-Indigenous academics and teachers to build relationships with Indigenous peoples. Do you have advice for non-Indigenous academics on how to build those relationships?

### **Ren Perkins**

For me, part of the ways that I am and my ways of knowing, being, and doing, is about building relationships. For a non-Indigenous person, and maybe not knowing that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, sometimes for me, and sometimes for us – I don't want to speak for all mob – but for me, sometimes we may be a bit reluctant to reach out for help. For some of the non-Indigenous staff, it's about maybe them reaching out and offering support in ways that may not be specifically be around this topic but then it's about, well, you're building a relationship. An example is for me, I've been asked to teach on a course that I know very little about, it's about mentoring and supervision – it's a Master's subject.

I didn't reach out but one of my colleagues, non-Indigenous colleagues, Stephanie, did, and she said, "Do you need some support?" While it seems kind of minor, it's building that rapport, showing that I can build that trust with Steph, the relationship's continuing and Steph's learning off me. You know, she said there's things that I'm doing in how I'm teaching and how I'm setting up my ECP that she's learned off me, so those Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

### **Dr Kate McLay**

A risk that we have when we are, as non-Indigenous academics, wanting to build relationship with our Indigenous colleagues, is that we can become paralysed by fear of failure. We're afraid of making a mistake and so we do nothing which means that we aren't actually contributing to the work of reconciliation, and we're not building relationship and creating a safe space for our Indigenous colleagues to be able to live and work and speak up. And I think sometimes we need to take a risk, and I don't mean that in a cavalier way at all; I mean responsible risks by making sure we're educating ourselves about respectful ways of interacting, but then also being vulnerable. As an example, at a [stretch rap? 0:12:21] meeting I attended leading up to National Reconciliation Week this year, we were encouraged to check-in with our Aboriginal friends and colleagues on Sorry Day, and I thought, "Okay. That's something that I can do to show my care".

So, I did some reading, and I thought very carefully about my words, and then I reached out to the Aboriginal people I have relationships with to say that I was really thinking about them on that day, and I did feel vulnerable doing that. I knew that there was a chance that I would get it wrong, and I was prepared to be told that I could do better – not cavalier risk, but the risk of vulnerability once we have taken the time to learn is important. If we don't do that, we don't actually build those relationships at all; we're too frightened to do so, and I think that the more I invest in developing my understanding by reading books, listening to podcasts like Speaking Out on the ABC, this podcast, watching great programs, participating in UQ

events – then all of those things, the more competent I become, and that makes it much easier for me because I feel able to reach out and not so afraid, and more able to be vulnerable.

### **Prof Bunda**

The School of Education also has a compulsory course in Indigenous education for pre-service teachers, and there's been evidence documented locally and nationally about student resistance to doing compulsory courses on Indigenous topics, and particularly in Indigenous education. How do you overcome that?

### **Ren Perkins**

I think there has been a shift and Kate can talk about that. For us as a school, we feel like we've got a mandate; we've just gone through our school review – the recommendations came back from the review. I think there was a really strong message from the review panel that us, as a school, need to be embedding Indigenous perspectives and incorporating Indigenous approach as to how we do our business and how we go about the day-to-day running of the school. It was the number one recommendation, so we feel that in terms of this kind of a course, we're mandated, as a school, that this is what we need to do, and that's not just me and Kate in her role, but the whole school, all staff.

And I think that places that course in a really good position, bringing staff along, then we can actually bring pre-service teachers along, so there's ways that we can do that, and in how we teach. And for me, in terms of how I teach that course, I kind of am myself; the core of who I am is about relationships, that relationality, so when I've taught on that course, I bring that in and I've encouraged my students to do the same as teachers, as pre-service teachers. So they're getting the true me, not the ran as a lecturer or a HDR student but you know, just ran as a Quandamooka man. So they're seeing that authentic me, and I want them to be the authentic them and I've encouraged them, what Kate was talking about, that vulnerability, try and create that safe space which is not easy when you've got 300 students but again, I just try and be myself. But it's about encouraging students to build those relationships.

### **Dr Kate McLay**

I think it's important to remember that for that initial teacher education is mapped to national standards and that we have specific standards that actually require graduate teachers to be able to engage with cultural competence with Indigenous perspectives. So, how do we overcome it? Well, we just keep pushing through. We must, because they can't demonstrate that they have achieved that standard unless we do our bit as well. I do think that it's improving; in the six or so years that I've taught in to the final year English, secondary English curriculum course, I have seen a shift where initially, you know, a student might use a poem or a resource that was written in the early 1900s and it might be what we would call a canonical text if you want to use another problematic term – canonical to who? But it might contain problematic language or very colonial ways of seeing the world and you need to see evidence then in what the student is submitting, that they are able to engage with that in ways that are respectful of Indigenous people's values and experiences.

There's been a couple of times in the past where I had encountered some resistance, but I would say that now I see a real shift in that – that the students are drawing in my course on their learnings from Ren's course, and that's what we want them to be doing. We want them to be making those connections within and across courses, and applying their knowledge from one course to another. And perhaps I think another dynamic in that is that while we've still certainly got... we're at the beginning of our journey, and we have a long way to go with

accomplishing what we need to accomplish, I think we're getting better at it, and I think perhaps part of the reason that I see that improvement is that they're not just only getting it from that course anymore, that we are getting incrementally better at making it something that is present to a greater and lesser degree sometimes, you know, in more courses than others but I think we're getting better at providing a unified voice and message, and we're increasing our capacity as a staff.

### **Prof Bunda**

That's a great segue into my last question. The podcast is called "Indigenising Curriculum in Practice" – what does that mean to you in relation to teaching and learning, and particularly within the discipline of education?

### **Ren Perkins**

When I'm designing a course and the mechanics – you had to in the ECP, setting out the assessment... I'm just thinking of last week, doing our ECPs, but it's that process of, you know, unpacking it. Another term is "decolonising it", and then looking at "How can I get that across to the students in ways that's meaningful for them and engaging for them and they're still learning? How do I teach that? What resources am I going to use?" So, it's that practical, the mechanics of organising a course, "Who am I going to get in if I'm going to use a guest speaker? Is it going to be an Elder? Is it going to be another colleague? Is it going to be a non-Indigenous colleague talking about it?" You know, a specific resource.

And "How do I engage with the students about bringing their experiences, their positionalities?" And I think that's going back to the previous question, is a way that we can actually, you know, for that core subject is what we... you know, we try and do that in that subject but as Kate said, in all our subjects. In terms of the resources – and it's not just for my courses, it's across-the-board which is why we ran those sessions – is having resources that are written by and developed by, and incorporated by Indigenous people; local knowledge, local people, using those resources in a meaningful way into the subject, and for me, I've been a tutor on other courses, but just having something simple... it's not simple, it's important, but having Acknowledgment of Country at the beginning of every lecture, not just at the beginning of the Week 1, but every lecture.

I've seen it in a couple of courses that I've been a tutor on – that it gets done by the... and that's why this process is so important, and I think kind of skipping questions, but it goes back to that previous question because if students are seeing that embedding Indigenous perspectives across all the courses, then it's not an outlier kind of a course. It's part of the, "This is how School of Education runs our courses". It's listening to and learning from Indigenous people and whether that's us within the school, and when I say "us", we have people associated with the school, like Aunty Denise Proud, and there's so much knowledge there. So, it's about how we do that, how we engage, how we listen and learn from those voices.

### **Dr Kate McLay**

I guess when I think about the notion of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice, I've come to feel that we can't separate our professional practice from the rest of our lives or ourselves. So, for me, to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and wisdoms into the courses that I teach, I actually need to be incorporating those things into my life in a holistic way, otherwise it's always going to be an afterthought in my practice. So, they seem like small things but in fact, they aren't, but things like being more effortful, to be relational, and not just task-

orientated during meetings, to actually allow space for some chat and some yarning, and some sharing of where people are at in their lives and to connect with people, not just to transact with people to get jobs done, embracing other ways of being in... another mundane thing – just taking 15 minutes to go and sit outside and give myself permission to sit outside and eat my lunch, and be aware of where I am and of what's happening around me. It seems ridiculous but that's the pace that we operate at, and I'm sure I'm not the only person who eats lunch with one hand and keeps typing with the other one, you know, during the day in this academic life that we live.

This year I have prioritised the works of Indigenous authors in my reading life and in my media consumption, and all of those things, they're not big things, they're simple life hacks if you like; I can listen to a book for free through the Brisbane City Council Library's app and it's enriching. I feel that I've learned something about myself, about where I live, about Indigenous peoples, whether it's a text that's set in the past or in a dystopian future, like Terra Nullis. You know, I learned something about the experiences and the resilience of Indigenous people, and I'm able then, in a really sincere way, it becomes much less effortful to incorporate those ways. They just become part of who I am, and that's, I guess, my focus as I move forward.

**Dr Barney**

Thanks, Ren and Kate for sharing your perspectives on Indigenising curriculum in Education. I really like the discussion around being vulnerable and the importance of being relational and also on ethics of care between staff and also between staff and students. And thanks for joining us for another episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice.

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