

The eight-way framework of Aboriginal Pedagogy

The eight-way framework described

The eight-way framework of Aboriginal pedagogy brings indigenous ways of knowing and being 'out of the dusty corners of anthropology and linguistics' and into the Australian classroom (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 206). It comprises eight interconnected pedagogies that see teaching and learning as fundamentally holistic, non-linear, visual, kinaesthetic, social and contextualised. The eight interconnected pedagogies are illustrated below:



Figure 1: 8ways Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework
(Yunkaporta n.d., p. 10)



Story sharing

Perhaps not surprisingly, the key pedagogy in the eight-way framework is the narrative based one of story sharing. This is fundamental to the eight ways as it is not only the way indigenous people keep abreast of current issues in an oral culture but is also the way they manage their dynamic but eternal connection to Country (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 206). Yarning is how indigenous people transmit knowledge and learn about the world (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 12). As Wheaton (cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p. 12) highlights, ‘elders teach using stories, drawing lessons from narratives to actively involve learners in introspection and analysis’. This is not monologic but a shared dialogue with learners; hence teaching and learning is also a social activity in Aboriginal pedagogy.



Deconstruct – reconstruct

The deconstruct – reconstruct pedagogy is a holistic, global orientation to learning whereby the initial focus is on the whole rather than the parts – ‘seeing an overall meaning, purpose and structure first and then breaking it down into manageable chunks’ (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 208). In this pedagogy, the text is initially modelled by the more knowledgeable other before the learner tries it independently; thus watching first then doing (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 29).



Non-linear

According to indigenous pedagogy learning is not sequential but a continuous relational endeavour. Problems are solved laterally through association and through making connections with existing knowledge (8 ways n.d.). Hence, there is much ‘repetition and returning to concepts for deeper understanding’ (Yunkaporta 2007, cited in Lawrence E, n.d.).

Land-links and community links



Land-links

‘Aboriginal pedagogies are intensely ecological, place-based’ and ‘drawn from the living landscape within a framework of profound ancestral and personal relationships with place’ (Marker 2006, cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p. 12). For indigenous people, learning is about linking content to local land and place and is thus highly contextualised.



Community links

Learning according to aboriginal pedagogy is ‘group-oriented, localised and connected to real-life purposes and contexts’ (Christie 1986 cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p.11). ‘[T]he motivation for learning is inclusion in the community, while teaching refers to community life and values’ (Stairs 1994, cited in Yunkaporta, n.d., p. 11).

Because holistic thinking and relational cognition are also grounded in people and place, the pedagogies of: deconstruct–reconstruct, non–linear, land–links and community links are interrelated on the 8-way framework.



Non-verbal

Perhaps also not surprisingly, Aboriginal pedagogy is kinaesthetic, hands-on learning with a strong emphasis on body language and silence. As Wheaton (cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p. 12) argues however, non verbal pedagogy ‘is more than just the idea of reduced language [..], ‘[a]boriginal learners test knowledge non-verbally through experience, introspection and practice, thereby becoming critical thinkers who can judge the validity of new knowledge independently’.

Learning Maps and Symbols and images



Learning Maps

This way of learning is to visualise pathways of knowledge. Diagrams or visualisations are used to map out processes explicitly for the learner (Yunkaporta, n.d., p. 11). 'In optimal Aboriginal pedagogy, the teacher and learner create "a concrete, holistic image of the tasks to be performed which serves as a reference point for the learner"' (Hughes and More 1997, cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p. 11).



Symbols and images

This pedagogy uses images and metaphors to understand concepts and content. Knowledge is coded in symbols, signs, images and metaphors and is therefore a tool for learning and memorizing complex knowledge.

As Yunkaporta (2011, p. 208) highlights, learning maps and symbols and images pedagogies are naturally linked; 'one provides the *structure* of memory while the other provides the *language* of memory'.

The interface between the eight-way framework and western pedagogy

As Yunkaporta (n.d. p. 27) argues, in spite of its endorsement, non indigenous teachers continue to be challenged by indigenous pedagogy often seeing a mismatch between it and western ways of teaching and learning. Although there are differences, I argue that to see indigenous and western pedagogy as irreconcilable is a 'false dichotomy' (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 9). My following discussion highlights the common ground between the eight-way framework and western pedagogy.

Story sharing

As Yunkaporta and Kirby (2011, p. 205) point out, the narrative or ‘written yarn’ genre’ is not a stranger to western pedagogy; Plato and the early Greeks would write their scholarly works as dialogues. Western tradition has continued to use the narrative as a way of making sense of the past. This is clearly the case in the mainstream Australian classroom as both personal and historical recounts are used when grappling with past events. Approaching learning through narrative in the mainstream classroom is not confined to history or English. In line with socio constructivism, students of all backgrounds are today encouraged to share their knowledge, experiences and stories on all content. Thus, there is a clear overlap between indigenous and western pedagogy.

The deconstruct – reconstruct

Below is an indigenous educator’s depiction of the deconstruct-reconstruct pedagogy:

[w]e see the whole concept at the beginning but don’t have to understand it at that point, just as long as we can see the shape of it. ... [...] [W]ith Aboriginal knowledge it has to come in stages, bringing in the focus gradually at points where a person is ready to understand and make connections. ...[Y]ou need to see the whole initially to get the shape of it, but you don’t need to understand it completely until you are ready to put it together for yourself, using your own skills and knowledge (Interview, 11/06/09, cited in Yunkaporta, n.d., p. 29).

What these comments reveal is a striking similarity between the deconstruct–reconstruct pedagogy and two teaching and learning approaches in western pedagogy: the genre approach and scaffolding. In the speaker’s recount, she/he depicts a process whereby the target genre is initially modelled and studied in its entirety before being broken down into its parts for analysis. This clearly emulates the genre approach to literacy. In addition, the speaker alludes to an approach whereby the task/genre is gradually handed over to

the learner to reconstruct for her/himself. This surely mirrors Vygotsky's scaffolding, whereby new concepts are initially introduced with support from the teacher with gradual withdrawal as the learner becomes independent.

Testing knowledge

There also appears to be an overlap between the non-verbal pedagogy and constructivism. Constructivism is an active process whereby learners test ideas and approaches in the creation of new knowledge. Similarly, in the non verbal pedagogy, aboriginal learners are encouraged to test new knowledge 'non-verbally through experience and practice' (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 12).

Main differences between the eight-way framework and western pedagogy

In general, western pedagogy has a sequential, behaviourist approach to teaching and learning whereby skills follow linear paths. In contrast, the eight-way framework sees learning as non-linear involving much 'repetition and returning to concepts for deeper understanding' (Yunkaporta, 2007 cited in Lawrence n.d.).

Distinguishing eight ways perhaps even more from western pedagogy is its introspective and reflective nature. Both the story sharing and non-verbal pedagogies encourage learners to look inwardly and to reflect on their learning. Although thoughtful reflection is also a tenet of constructivism, I have yet to see this play out in the mainstream classroom. A final point of difference may also be in the 'land links' pedagogy. Indigenous teaching is highly contextualized with a strong sense of people and place. Conversely, western pedagogy continues to deal with content predominantly in the abstract form, in spite of attempts to contextualise subject matter.

Advantages of the pedagogy

Apart from the overlaps already mentioned, which are clear advantages, eight way's orientation is non linear so students frequently return to learnt knowledge. I see this also as an advantage, as it allows for deeper understanding and introspection. Criticism of western pedagogy is that it is becoming too linear with focus on standardised testing at the expense of other skills. As Battiste (2002, p. 16) highlights western pedagogy 'ignores [...] knowledge that comes from introspection, reflection [...] and other types of self-directed learning'. Surely an important part of any learning is being able to reflect on *what* and *how* one learnt. This is a component I have failed to see during the numerous lessons I have observed this year in mainstream classes.

In addition, eight-ways place-based learning allows for more contextualised learning and as Craven (1999, cited in Lawrence n.d.) points out, this allows students to see how education is relevant to and meaningful in their own lives.

A further advantage is its explicit mapping of course tasks/materials so learners are aware of where the lesson or unit of work is going and what is expected. Criticism of western pedagogy, particularly in the area of literacy, is that some skills are now being taught too implicitly.

Possible disadvantages of the eight-way framework

A possible disadvantage is seeing the eight-way framework as totally separate to western pedagogy and therefore too different to introduce ideas into the mainstream classroom. A starting point is to see the connection between the two.

Possible disadvantages of a non sequential approach to literacy

Like all pedagogies there is not a one size fits all approach. While a global top down approach is good for some students, a more sequential, bottom up pedagogy to reading is necessary for others. This was evident in my recent ESL practicum in which preliterate Ethiopian and Sudanese students required help with basic decoding before moving onto the next skill of comprehension.

Putting the eight-way framework into practice

Yunkaporta and Kirby note that 'the mistake... is that Aboriginal perspectives have been confused with Aboriginal themes. A genuine Aboriginal perspective can bring Aboriginal [...] orientations to the study [of] mainstream content, no matter what the theme is' (2011, p. 204)

Deconstruct-reconstruct pedagogy

Without delving into literature, I needed only to reflect on my own practice to recognise that I am already using the deconstruct-reconstruct pedagogy. This is an approach I applied successfully during my practicum in which students initially studied the structure and grammar of fairytales before crafting one in the target language. I had also scaffolded the task gradually handing it over to students to do independently. Thus without knowing, I had simultaneously used both western and Aboriginal pedagogy in my practice.

What I learnt from research

The following are ways in which some of the eight pedagogies can be/have been used in mainstream classrooms.

Land links

As Yunkaporta and Kirby (2011, p. 210) highlight, a local place-based approach to learning can be embedded into any unit of work. For example, 'if [...] teaching about crop rotation in Britain, point out the direction of that island to students so they know they are learning about something real, from a real place' (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 210). This gives learning context rather than a whole lot of 'facts floating around in space' (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 209).

Learning Maps and symbols and images

A further initiative based on learning maps and symbols and images was one in which a teacher planned a history course based on the pedagogies.

‘Instead of four discrete units on Imperial China, Mediaeval Europe, Ancient Egypt and Aboriginal Australia, she combined all these on a dynamic visual planning map that outlined the multiple units (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 41). ‘The planning map was designed around serpent-beings from each of the four cultures – dragon, wyrm, ureus and rainbow serpent, and this was placed on the wall so students understood the scope of the course and the connectedness and purpose of each activity (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 41).

Symbols and images

As Yunkaporta (n.d., p. 41) points out, ‘several classes [have] made symbols for their class rules, and one school has even sat down with Elders to innovate five intercultural symbols representing the school rules’. ‘These symbols included a bowerbird display to represent ‘Quality Work’, and a curved track with an adult footprint followed by a group of children’s footprints, representing the rule ‘Follow Instructions’. One teacher using this symbol with her class reported an immediate connection and turnaround in behaviour. She said the students had not really understood the significance of this rule before, and in fact neither had she. The big realisation and paradigm shift was that the students needed to be following the teacher’s example, rather than the teacher chasing the students about their behaviour’ (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 41).

Positive Results from using the eight-way framework

Although not quantitative data, the following anecdotal evidence has been reported by teachers as a result of using the pedagogies:

‘A teacher reported ‘amazing’ outcomes in terms of engagement and higher order thinking, from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ (Yunkaporta n.d., p. 42). Consequently, she raised her expectations of these students (Interview, 03/06/09 cited in Yunkaporta n.d. p. 42).

Students from another class became more focused and were enthused by using indigenous pedagogy (Interview, 20/05/09 cited in Yunkaporta, n.d., p. 42). In addition, ‘[t]he teacher reported a significant positive shift in behaviour,

attitude, relationships and quality of student work' (interview, 20/05/09, cited in Yunkaporta n.d., p. 42).

Although the main area of improvement has been in student engagement of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, there have also been reports of increased connection with class material and improved higher order thinking and deep knowledge, all of which contribute to improved outcomes for students (DET NSW, 2003, cited in Yunkaporta, n.d., p. 43).

Questions for reflection and group discussion

Think of ways you may have used one or some of the eight-way pedagogy/ies in your praxis this year.

How can we use the eight-way framework in our praxis to improve the learning outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students?

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