Culturally responsive assessment strategies to inform a pilot program for Indigenous teacher education in remote communities of the Northern Territory of Australia

Dr June Slee
Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explicate the culturally responsive features of Charles Darwin University’s Assessment Rules (2008) in order to inform a pre-service teacher education program preparing Indigenous students for teacher qualification.
Tertiary educators of students enrolled in formal teacher education preparation programs have a pedagogical ‘best practice’ obligation to model culturally responsive assessment strategies that inform future classroom practitioners and yet conform to university assessment rules.
Issue

The increasing emphasis on **nationally consistent standards** both in schools and universities makes this duality difficult to accomplish and increases the likelihood of teaching primarily to tests rather than to culturally diverse needs found in every classroom.
Is Indigenous education in crisis?

Students in years three, five and nine, living in very remote areas, an average of:

- 36 per cent achieved national benchmarks in reading
- 37.6 per cent in numeracy
- 24.2 per cent in writing
Difficulties for remote communities

- Recruiting and retaining staff is a major issue
- Non-Indigenous teachers can feel ‘isolated in remote communities and find teaching and living in a bilingual, bicultural context very exhausting’ (Maher, 2008)
- Teachers leave after a short period of teaching because of the difficulties
- Indigenous assistant teachers (IATs) are often the staffing constant in remote schools.
Growing Our Own Goals

• To empower Indigenous educators to join culturally relevant ways of being, knowing and doing with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge;

• To empower non-Indigenous teacher mentors to understand culturally relevant Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing and infuse these with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge to strengthen opportunities for children’s learning
In *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines*, refers to as the intersection between higher education and Indigenous experience, the ‘Cultural Interface’.
The Cultural Interface

The Cultural Interface is constituted by points of intersecting trajectories. It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourse within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation (Nakata, 2008, p. 199).
Bridges of meaningfulness

If the tertiary educators realise this goal in their own professional development and work at the *Cultural Interface*, they will have the capacity to build “bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities” (Gay, 2000, p. 29).
Bridges of meaningfulness

There are many instances in the Northern Territory of Indigenous learners failing abysmally in formal academic tests conducted in English, yet in a different context, demonstrate advanced proficiencies in matters important to their lifeworld (NT BOS, 2008).
Nakata’s culturally responsive tenets

• We need to keep in focus that future graduates into professions must be able to work in complex and changing terrains - knowledge production stands still for nobody.
Indigenous Nations of Australia
Nakata’s culturally responsive tenets

- We need curriculum designs to build on [the] capacities and experiences of Indigenous students and to create opportunities for learners to achieve a balance of knowledge, skills and processes for exploring disciplinary boundaries.
Nakata’s culturally responsive tenets

- Indigenous students need much stronger support than they currently have to engage more rigorously. The challenges they face need much more attention in curriculum and assessment design (Nakata, 2008, p. 224).
CDU’s Assessment Rules (2008)

Mission statement

The over-arching declaration of CDU’s Assessment Rules is: All student assessment shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner (CDU, 2008, p. 1).
Objective One

To ensure that all processes for student assessment are transparent, accountable, flexible, and fair, and maintain consistent academic standards (CDU, 2008, p. 1).
Objective Two

To ensure that each assessment task is designed to fulfil the outcomes and objectives of the unit to which it relates (CDU, 2008, p. 1).
Learning outcomes are defined within the Assessment Rules as the “knowledge, skills and attitudes that students are expected to be able to demonstrate on completion of the unit” (CDU, 2008, p. 2). This definition is a central precept for the Growing Our Own teacher educators.
**Contextual Framework of this Paper**

Assessment is the process of collecting evidence and making judgements as to how well students have achieved the intended learning outcomes (CDU, p. 1).
Authentic Assessment

Providing students with the opportunity to engage with the real-world assessment tasks that are relevant and meaningful, especially in the professional context associated with the subject or discipline (CDU, 2008, p. 1).
Assessment Procedures

Assessments must recognise competencies and achievements, maintain standards and support professional recognition.
Assessment Principles

Principle 1: Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn. Assessment should play a positive role in shaping the learning experiences of students (CDU, 2008, p. 10).
Assessment Principles

Principle 2: Assessment should accommodate individual learning differences in students. Assessment should be based on the objectives and allow students to demonstrate outcomes in appropriately diverse ways (CDU, 2008, p. 10).
Differentiating Curriculum
Outcomes and Objectives

1. Content modifications should be reflective of student’s culture, experiential background, primary language, and family and community.

2. Integrate content knowledge and skills that are reinforced across different subjects over an extended period of time.

3. Both cognitive as well as academic goals must be taught in integrated ways.

4. Implement high-level learning expectations and outcomes taught in a challenging curriculum.

5. Cooperative, active, and inquiry-based tasks should be included in daily instruction (Hoover, 2008, p. 9).
Assessment Principles

Principle 3: Assessment should be demonstrably fair to all students. Assessment practices should be inclusive and support equity principles. They should cater for both individual and group diversity. It should be recognised that all assessment models have their limitations and capacity to disadvantage certain students, and every effort must be made to minimise such disadvantage by using an appropriate variety of assessment models. In addition, inclusive language should be used, avoiding gender racial, cultural or other language bias.
Methods to evaluate student progress drive curriculum and instruction as much as they reflect the results of their application,” and concluded succinctly that “inclusive education absolutely requires inclusive assessment” (Sailor, 2007)
Build the bridge of meaningfulness between the learners’ two worlds (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
IATs, will also become citizens of two other worlds - that of the learner, and that of the pre-service teacher. Occupying the world where the teacher is also the learner is a powerful means of developing empathy and thus allowing teachers to understand their own students’ educational dilemmas and delights (Slee, 2008). This is the Cultural Interface.
Even those who have opportunities to go into the field to learn directly from the Indigenous people are learning more about the limits of their own knowledge practices than they are about the complexities and meanings of Indigenous knowledge traditions, which is my view makes this perhaps the most valuable exercise of all (Nakata, 2008, p. 225).