

Thesis abstract

Difficult knowledge and uncomfortable pedagogies: student perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in Critical Indigenous Australian Studies

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This research presents a grounded interrogation of students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in two mandatory stand-alone Critical Indigenous Australian Studies subjects at an Australian university. The study proffers rare empirical insight into the student experience of teaching and learning about colonialism, racism, whiteness and privilege. It contributes to building a better understanding of the complexities, opportunities, challenges and risks of four specific pedagogical approaches: critical anticolonialism, critical race theory, critical whiteness and intersectional privilege studies. The research was conducted by way of a critical ethnographic process involving in-depth interviews with students and teachers, focus group discussions with students and classroom observations. The research design was built on critical social constructionist foundations informed by poststructural and critical hermeneutical theoretical perspectives.

The study produced two key findings. The first is that learning in Critical Indigenous Australian Studies is inherently affective. Affectivity plays a determinant role in the opportunities, challenges and risks of teaching about colonialism, racism, whiteness and privilege. This finding signposts the need to take into serious consideration the emotion-

ally onerous task of teaching and learning in Critical Indigenous Australian Studies and the need for compassionate pedagogical approaches and strategies that can productively navigate and manage affectivity. The second key finding is that if Critical Indigenous Australian Studies is to inspire and motivate students to act for social justice and social change, teaching and learning must focus equally on both the 'know-what' and the 'know-how'. Knowing what the urgent matters are without the cultivation of practical skills to engage in social change action falls short of meeting teaching and learning objectives. A dedicated and substantive focus on cultivating practical social change skills such as discursive counter-narrative skills is a pedagogical pathway toward empowering, inspiring and motivating students to act for social change.

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