

Country with Sally Butler and Sonja Carmichael

(T: Tracey K: Katelyn SB: Sally SC: Sonja)

Voiceover

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

T: 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. I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging Country and the various Countries from where you, our listeners, are located, and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I acknowledge the ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to society at local, national and international levels. You may very well ask what is the connection between acknowledging Country and Indigenising curriculum? It’s important for us to think about Indigenous knowledge systems that have helped inform practice on Country, and that’s exactly where universities are located. They are located on Aboriginal Country, and the knowledge that we bring to our students about Country will enable those students to have a more meaningful relationship with this Country. I’m joined by my colleague and co-host, Associate Professor Katelyn Barney.

K: Hi everybody. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we’re recording and also where you’re listening from, and pay my respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong connections to Country. 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 living and working in the engine. In this series, Tracey and I are interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they’re Indigenising curriculum at the University of Queensland.

T: Together we are going to ask questions to unravel the why the how and the when of Indigenising curriculum.

K: Our theme for this episode is based on the principle of Country, and our guests today are Associate Professor Sally Butler and Sonja Carmichael. Welcome.

SB: Hi.

T: Would you mind to introduce yourselves in whatever way you feel comfortable.

SC: Yaama. I’m Sonja. I’m a Quandamooka djagan marimba and live up in Minjerribah among the Ngugi people, one of three clans. I belong to the Quandamooka people of Minjerribah and Mulgumpin Moreton Bay in South East Queensland. I’ve completed a Master of Philosophy in Art History regenerating Quandamooka weaving, solving the knot, and continue sharing our practices intergenerationally ensuring knowledge of our weaving never comes close to disappearing again.

T: Sally?

SB: I'm Sally Butler. I teach Art History in the School of Communication and Arts here at UQ, and have been doing for a long time, and we'll leave it at that. I have a special interest, a long-term interest in Indigenous arts and culture, and have been privileged to convene a few courses in area, and also have honours and post-graduate supervisions, and I was the principle supervisor for Sonja's wonderful research project.

T: Our listeners are interested in the way in which you two met, and what your relationship is like? Sally, do you want to start that?

SB: So we met many years ago when I was introduced to Sonja by an academic at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, that I had worked with for a long time as a tutor for a while, and then worked with a lot of the academics there. Jon introduced me to Sonja and said that he had met Sonja, that she had a wonderful research project, and we went from there and Sonja enrolled in art history. And our relationship has been fantastic because Sonja has been able to co-teach and run weaving workshops on Country on Minjerribah for my courses, and has participated and contributed to the field schools that the wonderful experiential learning of weaving workshops on Country where Sonja's been a real leader has been one of the highlights of my career actually, and I've enjoyed it so much.

SC: Sally and I have known each a long time it feels, and we've travelled a huge path together over the last decade during the course of my thesis. We relate well to each other and working with her in the art history space has been a great environment for my practice-based approach to regenerating Quandamooka weaving. It's been great working with Sally with her amazing knowledge base and she's very generous in sharing her expertise to frame knowledge in the art history context. And she also draws out my knowledge as a First Nations person and fibre artist helping me think about what we're doing and gets excited with me along the way about what's happening.

K: That's really special to hear about your relationship and how you guys work together. We would like to talk a bit more about the field schools that you've taken students on, because one of the UQ Indigenising curriculum design principles is Country. So Sally, could you talk a bit about where you've taken students and what you think students learn on that field school?

SB: The main principle is to go to a very remote art centre. So the art centres are very embedded in the community, they're quite isolated, so they're doing a lot of different functions, and it's also good for the students to get right out of their comfort zone. So those places are included, I think, eight or nine times we went to Ramingining in Arnhem Land, Mapuru, which is very small community in Arnhem Land, Ikuntji or Haasts Bluff in Central Australia west of Alice Springs, North Queensland, quite a few communities around Cairns and up to Hope Vale, and the last one was in Tiwi Islands.

T: Sonja, when you've joined Sally on those field schools, what's been the impact for you?

SC: The impact has been profound. I've made some lifelong connections to very welcoming people in communities with an openness to sharing their rich knowledge on their Country, walking together on their spirited lands, on sacred Country and sharing a knowledge and cultural practices like weaving as learning, and I'd like to be able to return the welcome with having as guest to our beautiful saltwater Country too. Being a

First Nations guest on field schools in recognition of people's Country has been so life changing, I guess, in terms of the different communities, you know, with so much in common but things are so different. And the social knowledge, an enormous amount of social knowledge as opposed to academic that we're connecting with Country on people's Countries being and learning from each other in all very different experiences on different parts of Country as expected, so it's been amazing.

SB: On student evaluations, the single most common comment is a life changing experience, and that isn't just about art history, it's not just about academic knowledge, it's about learning about themselves, learning about cultural difference and learning about the quantity and quality of Indigenous knowledge that goes far beyond what we look at in art history. I can't even begin to say what they learn. We have students from across the sector as well, so you don't have to just be studying art history. I've had marine biology post-graduate students, I've had philosophy students, you name it, and it doesn't matter because the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge, particularly when it's embedded on Country, incorporates all of those different what Western academia calls "disciplines", sort of brings it together. Pretty soon after we arrive in the community, they all realise they're all pretty well starting from scratch, so that brings them together as well. It's, like, "Oh? We thought we knew things. We realise now we don't know anything," because they just haven't understood that knowledge at work when they've been learning it in a much more academic sense.

K: So you're taking students from really diverse backgrounds and discipline areas. How do you prepare them to go on the field school, because obviously they need a level of cultural capability to do the travel and be in those places, so how do you prepare students?

SB: Priority is given to students who have done the Indigenous Arts and Culture course, and that is a lot of Indigenous knowledge, theoretical and practical components of that. I try to incorporate that into a number of lectures and tutorials, or really tutorials more than lectures, that we do before we go, and that includes standpoint theory and introducing them to the idea of the reflective journal. So the reflective journal isn't an assessment, it's actually a learning what were you doing here when this happened? How did you incorporate questions et cetera, but the key thing I think, and Sonja will have experienced me telling students this, is that they have to shut up for 48 hours; don't do anything, don't say anything until somebody tells you to do something, or asks you a question. And they're quite shocked by that. It's, like, "Won't that be seen as rude?" "No." And immediately they're in. Once Indigenous people understand we are taking the lead here, good, off they go, so that's always a fun one to watch, how they incorporate that.

T: There's many parts of the university now that are interested in Indigenising curriculum and thinking about taking classes into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Sonja, if I start with you, what would be the one thing you would want those lecturers to really think about before they take their classes into the community?

SC: Where they're going and on whose Country and how they'll behave on someone else's Country, knowing our place and as I mentioned, the differences. For example, sharing, the generous sharing and knowledge sharing that happens when we visit communities. For example, the [0:11:09.7] when we were recently on field trip, and we were still

allowed to come during sorry business, and understanding the expectation that we would be respectful, which we were, and understanding, which everyone did, helped to have a greater understanding of preparing for different parts of and working together. We've experienced lots of time on Country together with whatever the student stays, from the art history course and had weaving circles, which is a great way to connect on Country, and yarn and share and weaving and learning in that part of the field school has been great.

T: Sally, would you add anything to that?

SB: Yes. I've got a 3Rs; relationships, respect and remuneration. I haven't delivered a field school in a community where I didn't have or form a pre-existing relationship with someone. You must have preferably an Indigenous person, but it might be an art centre manager or something, someone on the ground in the community who knows the community and who knows you. It just doesn't work without that, and part of relationship is also you're in for the long haul. These are not short, sharp, these are long existing relationships. Quite often we have a Memorandum of Understanding, we help people with grant applications, it's giving and taking et cetera. Respect is respecting the utter privilege of being shown Country and the knowledge that we're learning, and it's always so generous it just flaws me, but learning to really respect that, to understand that this is another beyond tertiary institution that you're going to, and it has to be respected in terms of that kind of education. And for that reason, the remuneration. People must be paid. They're not there to just show you Country, take you out on a bush trip, that's all learning, so the cultural workshops are factored in as part of the budget, and students have to pay for those extras on top of their fees – they do – it's a privilege for them, it's not a problem, but every part of that must be remunerated, and that is part of the respect for the knowledge. So it's a long haul experience, it pays enormous dividends, and hopefully is mutually beneficial, but it isn't a simple thing to organise at all.

K: That's really great to hear you talk about the R's of working with Indigenous people. Tracey and I often talk about in our teaching about the Rs of relationships, respect, reciprocity and that there are a lot of rewards in doing that. A number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have written about that as well.

T: It's called Indigenising Curriculum in Practice. If you had one key idea, one key point that you want to make with others about Indigenising curriculum, what would that be? Sonja, I'm going to go to you first.

SC: For me it must be in the voice of First Nations people, involving First Nations people as part of an ongoing process and practice. It's about new ways of learning which will be different in different places as we can appreciate.

T: Sally, did you want to add to that?

SB: I'd just like to respectfully suggest to my non-Indigenous colleagues to stop treating Indigenous knowledge as a footnote to their course, and whack it in at the end in Week 13 or Week 12 or something, and maybe take First Nations culture seriously in terms of first knowledge, and possibly start the course within Indigenous knowledges, and see what a transformation that has on your course and let it take leadership.

T: What a great point to end on. Thank you both.

K: Thanks Sally and Sonja. So great to have you here with us, and Sonja for making the journey from the Island to be here, with us particularly. It's great to hear about how you work together, you're a long-term relationship that's really important, and also the field schools and where you've taken students. I think there's a lot to learn there for other academics as well. And thanks for joining us for another episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice.

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