

Chapter 14

Learning on and from Country

Teaching by incorporating Indigenous Relational worldviews

Kathryn Coff

Who I am

Kathryn Coff

My name is Kathryn Coff and I am a proud Yorta Yorta woman living on Dja Dja Wurrung Country; I live at the foothills of Leaganook. I come from a family where our relationship with Country is strong and ongoing. You could say we were raised by Country. “You look after country ... Country he look after you” Neidjie, 2015, p. 222. I feel her beneath my feet, hearing the voices of the wind, and the healing of the warmth of the sun and the cleansing of rain in my soul.

As a Yorta Yorta woman I would like to acknowledge Country and the pain that she holds. I acknowledge her resilience and her knowledge. How she whispers gently to me through the wind in the leaves and kisses me on the cheek to remind me, I’m home. I feel most at home in the depths of fresh water and when water is lapping at my feet. I acknowledge Leaganook mountain in whose foothills I live. She reveals something new to me through the day and wraps her arms around me at night. I acknowledge my Ancestors and all First Nations people, they remind me every day who I am and what I need to do. I would like to acknowledge the Elders that did not give up, it is because of them that First Nations people are still here today. I acknowledge the Elders who are still holding strong to what is important. I also acknowledge those emerging Elders, who are coming out strong, proud, so comfortable in their own skin. They are the leaders of tomorrow.

From the Western worldview I would introduce myself in this way: I have been working with children and adults that struggle to engage with the dominant non-Indigenous culture for nearly 30 years. I am a registered teacher and continue to teach within schools as well as being Indigenous Practitioner in Residence at La Trobe University. I also manage the First Nations Education programs in our local area.

Introduction

I began this chapter by introducing myself and I did so choosing my words carefully because the way we introduce our work and ourselves is important and clearly expresses our worldviews. I also acknowledged Country because this is important to who I am as a Yorta Yorta woman. You will also see by the way I have written this chapter and the language I use, certain other things are important to me. For instance, you will notice that I capitalise certain words – Community, Country,



▲ Figure 14.1

Learning on Country

and Ancestors. This is because as a First Nations person with my belief system, they are proper nouns (Figure 14.1).

In this chapter I share other aspects of my worldview as a Yorta Yorta woman. I begin by describing what I have learned while working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people on Country as well as outlining how many teachers (including non-Indigenous teachers) can do this in their classrooms, too. I then describe the impact of the worldviews on our understanding and the impact this can have on our students. Next, I provide a case study of what can be done to address the needs of students in terms of their learning. I conclude with some considerations for all teachers.

Learning on and from Country

Over the years, I have learned many things on and from Country. Martin and Mirraboopa (2003, p. 3) describe Country as including “the land, skies, waterways, animals, plants, and all the elements such as wind or fire.” It is important to point out that learning on Country is not just about taking your lessons outside

or even using nature within the classroom, although these are certainly some ways that you can incorporate Country in your teaching. Rather, by taking Australia's First Peoples' view on Country, you can develop a deeper awareness and use this to transform your teaching practices.

Learning on and from Country is about changing the way you can see the world, merging our Indigenous Relational worldview with Western approaches to pedagogy in order for Country to be included in every part of how we teach and what is taught. Teachers can include content about Country, but more importantly, if they challenge their pre-existing beliefs and ideas about pedagogical approaches to teaching, Country can be included throughout the curriculum.

Incorporating Country is particularly pertinent in today's society where many people have become detached from their environment in which they live. For example, in my role as a university Indigenous Practitioner I go into classrooms to educate students, teachers, professionals, and lecturers, and when I state, "There are not four seasons in Australia as we don't live in Europe," the look of bewilderment is astounding. And when I tell them our trees are not deciduous – for many this is the first time they have heard this.

In contrast, for First Nations people everything – our whole being – is about our local Community and our local Country and many of us know it well. From a Western perspective a lot of this is taught within the classroom, but it is not embedded at an everyday level. In contrast,

Learning, as Aboriginal people have come to know it, is holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential, communal, spiritual, and learned within a language and a culture. What guides their learning (beyond family, community, and Elders) is spirit, their own learning spirits who travel with them and guide them along their earth walk.

(Battiste, 2010, p. 2)

A key part of this is learning about Country, as it represents

our survival, our humanity, our worldview and language, our imagination and spirit, our very place in the world depends on our capacity to act for ourselves, to speak for ourselves, to engage in the world and the actions of our colonizers, to face them head on.

(Smith, 1999, p. 198)

However, it is not just critical for us, but given the precarious state of our environment it is important for all. So please bring Country into your lessons.

When planning your lessons, take into consideration how you might teach from and about Country. Think about what your students can learn from Country. For instance, consider such questions as: What is the history of the Country where you live? What is the history of the land, both before and after colonisation? This is especially important in contemporary Australia where many people know more about the history of other countries than they do their own. Take your students outside so they get to know their landscape and come to understand different peoples' relationships with Country. Also have them consider their Country now

and their Ancestors' Country before. As teachers you can model this, talking about your Community and where you come from. Talk from your 'heart' about your Country and your family, and get your students to do the same. This opens opportunities for sharing and understanding different worldviews.

As I will describe next, incorporating Country into a teaching program is relatively easy to do and also quite possible within our current national curriculum. Ways of including Country in your teaching could include:

- Taking students outside to teach. This can be done in any subject. I find this interesting as I hear many teachers think that they won't get as much work completed outside, and yet I hear many students say they do. They love the change of scenery, the fresh air clears their head, and changing up how you teach can refresh a session;
- Teaching how to care for Country by understanding Country. Create opportunities for students to feel and measure the wind and the rain, changes in temperature and observe changes in cloud formation. In this way you can teach through Indigeneous pedagogy;
- Using raw materials from Country as resources for teaching. This could include materials brought into the classroom or using landforms and flora and fauna outside as key parts of your teaching. Interestingly this practice of using natural materials often occurs in early childhood settings with younger age level students, but sadly it seems to cease with older students. Yet there is much they can get out of such experiences;
- Raising awareness of the 'real' Australian seasons by bringing them into the classroom. Here use First Nations people's understanding of the seasons. This involves looking at where the stars are in the sky (and to do this they will need to learn the directions of North, South, East and West and, in turn, this is important to know where you are positioned in Country), the length of day and night, changes in the temperature, what birds and animals can be heard and even the sounds they are making, which birds are nesting, what plants can be seen, what is flowering and what is ready for harvest. (Note: many botanical gardens around Australia have this information on display for visitors);
- Making Country your classroom. This might include investigating an ecosystem and then establishing or supporting one nearby. For example, this might involve adding fish to a school pond or local dam and getting students to research which plants are needed to sustain life. Students can then monitor any changes that occur over time. Another option is to go on excursions to get students to physically explore and know the Country they live on. This is especially important in today's society where so many children have a lot of screen time, but do not know or engage in their local landscape;
- Using vegetable gardens for learning. Again this seems to be something that happens with younger age groups, especially around their science and mathematics programs, but less so in the older years – yet it can be equally valuable. In addition to growing conventional fruit and vegetables for consumption, it is also useful to incorporate local indigenous plants in your school gardens. This can also be used to show how the food web can be different for First Nations

people. By doing this you can also build on the previous suggestion of bringing Country into your teaching – by first observing such plants in nature and then planting and being responsible for growing something is a way to develop responsibility for Country;

- Having a school fire pit. Despite the potential concerns over safety, it can provide classes and the whole school community with a focus for ‘coming together’. I give opportunities for conversations around a fire, and from a First Nations perspective, cleansing occurs through the smoke of fire;
- Bringing in local First Nations people to talk about Country. Whilst this may seem obvious and even simple to achieve, many difficulties can prevent this from happening. A first step is to build relationships with your local First Nations Community. If it proves too difficult, take students out to events. Going to events that are already happening in your region is a great way to engage and learn on so many levels.

These ideas for learning on and from Country are important in their own right and they also demonstrate a coming together by clear differences in the worldviews of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. I will explain this in more detail next.

Worldviews

Most of you will know that the protocol of acknowledging the traditional custodians of the Country on which you meet has become a common practice in schools and other public domains. It is not just a sign of respect, but an important way of recognising Indigenous worldviews. (If you are uncertain, all State Departments of Education include information about how this can be done). Key to this are the following parts: Acknowledgement, Country, Community, and Ancestors. An Acknowledgement is like a big thank you for allowing you to be on the Country of First Nations people. I have already described how important Country is to Indigenous people and by providing an Acknowledgement, you signify your recognition of this. Equally, acknowledging Community and Ancestors, especially when you speak from ‘the heart’, gives due recognition to the history – past and present – of Indigenous people.

This last part of Acknowledging is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in our Community who may not feel as safe at school as perhaps they should. Sometimes they may feel that they are not truly seen or understood for who they are and what they bring to school. One might even go so far as to say that schools might even feel threatening or dangerous for young people unless their, and other diverse worldviews, are understood. Sadly there is a shared belief amongst First Nations Community that to ‘get through’ school successfully Indigenous young people must assimilate into non-Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Too often this means letting go of who they are and suppressing their belief system and identity or leaving their language and culture at the door (Martin, 2016) (also see Chapter 8).

The reasons for the disconnect, as described above, is that Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of understanding the world can be very different. That is not to say that ideas about the world don't also come together. While we would not want to risk implying that Indigenous people 'see the world differently' (this could be a terrible stereotype), Indigenous worldviews are fundamentally different from non-Indigenous worldviews. For example, within an Indigenous worldview ways of being, knowing, and doing are relational: "Humans are not central nor alone in knowledge construction. Instead knowledge construction is through the cyclical and equal relationship between Community, Country and the Ancestral Core" (Martin, 2008, p. 87). That is, boundaries between humans and nature are blurred. Things are not animate and inanimate, rather everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English. This is because in Indigenous culture "If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations" (Little Bear, 2000, p. 3).

As a First Nations person I gain knowledge about who I am and who I want to be from Country, Ancestors, and Community. As I have described, I gain knowledge from Country – it speaks to me and communicates with me every day. I also believe my Ancestors speak to me everyday. In non-Indigenous way this might be called your 'gut' feeling, but to me there is ancestral memory that we hold in our cells. Community is people or family and together we operate like a giant organism. A beautiful analogy I have heard is that Community is like a flock of birds. We move like a flock of birds, at times someone is at the front, but when that person gets tired, he or she moves to the back and someone else moves to take their place seamlessly.

Such a worldview is in contrast to the Western worldview. For example, how we gain knowledge from this perspective is about human-led experiences and knowledge production. Western worldviews are often built upon incremental knowledge and the study of things, rather than the experience with or in them (as is the case with Country for First Nations people).

Interestingly, however, by highlighting the differences in the worldviews it is possible to increase "the mutual understanding that is created between people" (McMahon, 2017, p. 89).

Figure 14.2 illustrates some of these fundamental differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. It is important to note that these represent generalisations as there is no one Indigenous nor non-Indigenous worldview. In fact, many individuals may hold aspects of both worldviews. For instance, Indigenous people can be both scientific and at the same time value what they know from their Ancestral knowledge. Therefore, it is important to try and avoid oppositional and binary thinking and to remember that there are many ways of being. Even so, it is useful to recognise that differences in worldviews may exist as this can help us understand and support Indigenous students.

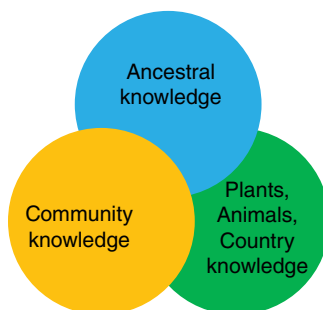
It should also be noted that over the years, some non-Indigenous Australians have found it difficult to have their worldviews challenged, or even to understand the fact that people live with different views or belief systems. This is particularly difficult given the way that the dominant culture, one that constructs their

Western worldviews



Knowledge is discovered, experienced or constructed by humans

Indigenous Relational worldviews



Knowledge is learnt, experienced & revealed. All entities through relationship are equal.

▲ Figure 14.2

Western and Indigenous worldviews (McMahon, 2017)

privilege, is described and attributed to different groups in society, as many non-Indigenous people do not see themselves in that way. If you wish to explore this further, theories about White Privilege help explain how the dominant culture comes to be normalised as the only way of doing things (see Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

Many have spent their whole life not even thinking that there is any other way than the way they have lived and the beliefs that they hold. Mishel McMahon and Leroy Little Bear illustrate this by describing how we see a tree. Through the Western model, a tree only has meaning when we see it and say 'Oh, that's a beautiful tree'. Yet science is closer to First Nations peoples' way of seeing the world and would state that the tree holds all the memory of being a tree within it. From the Indigenous Relational worldview, because all is animate, knowledge is held in Country and everything that is alive holds all the information about everything else in it. Furthermore, it is revealed when needed. So I hold the same knowledge as a grain of sand, or as a tree. However, when Indigenous students come to school they are often walking into the Western way of seeing the world – a way that is new and different from the belief system they have grown up understanding. Be aware, too, that this occurs regardless of an Indigenous student's skin colour, as cultural understanding, beliefs, and 'ways of being' are not determined by how we look. Fortunately, learning with and on Country (as described above) can provide a way for all students to learn, to 'be seen' and to feel welcomed with our schools. So do consider how you can incorporate different worldviews and Country into your classroom.

To illustrate how teaching can be designed to extend students' worldviews, this section provides an example of an established education program, The Meeting Place, in the Loddon Mallee region of Victoria.

Case study of a local Indigenous education program

Five First Nations teachers – two Elders and three Indigenous teachers – developed the Meeting Place program. At this point I would like to acknowledge the two Elders, Uncle Rick Nelson and Aunty Julie McHale. The group that worked on the program also involved other Community members, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working together. The purpose of the program was to address our concerns about Indigenous kids who were not doing well in school. Two very clear things were happening. First our kids in the community were not engaged in school: many were not at school or if they were going to school, they were struggling to stay in the classroom. Second, many teachers did not know how to reach our kids. We decided that as adults in our community we had to do something about this. So we wrote a list of what we felt would help our kids. We suggested it would be beneficial to:

- Create a setting and a program where our children could come to learn our way, at least part time. We proposed to set up a space where they could learn through Culture and Country;
- Have our Community's adults involved in their children's education. We believed this would impact student academic outcomes;
- Support non-Indigenous classroom teachers and principals by meeting with them to discuss curriculum, going into their classrooms to show them how you can teach it, mentoring them through the process, providing lesson plans, and writing units of work;
- Support First Nations teachers currently working in schools, as well as pre-service teachers;

- Provide support, as necessary, so we could all come together to support each other to write curriculum, provide practicum opportunities and employment;
- Commit to providing sustainable long-term support – being there all the way through our students' schooling and into their first training and or employment situation;
- Provide support to schools to increase attendance;
- Provide support to schools with literacy, numeracy, and homework, for all students;
- Create a homework centre at the schools and in other settings as appropriate;
- Encourage Indigenous students who were academically strong to move to the next step.

We supported these aims and by implementing associated approaches and structures, these initiatives were able to make marked and sustainable changes. Two key aspects of this program was that 1) it was First Nations people who ran and led it, and 2) it was always strengths based. As Sarra (2014) notes, too many educational programs for Indigenous kids start from a deficit position. A recent independent evaluation completed on the Meeting Place and all of Nalderuns programs found that, "Through Nalderun the local Aboriginal community has increased pride, confidence, identity, visibility and access to leadership opportunities. 'Increased pride' was the most commonly expressed significant outcome by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents. Aboriginal community members also have an increased sense of safety, connection, community and belonging" (Moxham, 2018, p. 7).

Most importantly because we involved everyone: teachers, other members of community and other organisations we created a web affect not just with the First Nations Community, but within the whole community. As Little Bear discusses in the article on Jagged Worldviews Colliding, "The 'spider web' of relations ensures that the welfare of the group is the most important thing in Aboriginal societies. The value of wholeness tells the members that, if all do their parts, then social order will be the result" (Little Bear, 2000, p. 8).

Ways for teaching

The framework for the program described above and one that I advocated here is based on "YOE, respect Yourself, Others and the Environment", as created by Aunty Julie McHale. It also reflects the Indigenous Relational model outlined

previously. These approaches can create in students a feeling that they are a part of something bigger, that they have responsibilities to look after their Country and Community. Most importantly, these things support their feeling of having a place in this world.

Also important is a two-way or both-ways learning approach (Purdie, Milgate, & Bell, 2011): that is creating “a partnership relationship between First Peoples and Settler cultures in Australia ... a negotiated space ... ‘third space’, to imply that, like the cultural literal zone where land and sea meet ... it is dynamic and fluid, like that of a coast line”. Two-way learning incorporates both worldviews into our teaching practice. Such a pedagogy should not divide us, but rather include everyone. Both ways are equally important and provide a way of creating a new space within the classroom. For example, to achieve this in our Meeting Place program we included both worldviews in how we taught our students. We did this by working out how we could work together without losing our ways of being, knowing, and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). The Meeting Place started out initially as an after-school activity, but we realised how engaged our kids were and just how much they were learning when they were in the right environment. Reflecting Indigenous Community, learning happened in a multi-age setting, where our kids completed activities in skin groups, each with its own animal, plant, and place in Country. We advocated that because this program was educational it should be taught during school hours. So we went into schools to support teaching and learning, by building connections between both worldviews. When we did this we would sing, create songs, dance, go out on Country, but we would also write, design, articulate, delve into the why and the how of the world, our shared history, and how we can move forward in positive ways into the future.

Most First Nations people from around the world have similar components to teachings.

1. They teach us about how we should be in the world as people.
2. They teach us how something in nature is formed or why things are the way are.

Because our kids have heard and learned so many ‘teachings’ from across the world, we had no idea the impact this would have had until one memorable day. Two of our youngest children, both around seven years old, came up to us and said they wanted to perform a play. Normally, when children of such an age announce such a thing, especially when they are ad-libbing, you think you are going to get something a little silly. However, they created their own ‘teaching’ on the spot and it was about friendship, and that, yes, at times we might hurt each other, but through true forgiveness and love we can work through this – no matter the differences. Within the play they even moved from one character to another. After they had finished we spoke to everyone about what they had learnt. One student responded by asking the question, “Why are teachings from a long time ago, when the dreaming is always?” We knew then that what we were doing was keeping our culture alive.

The Meeting Place, and Nalderun (the overarching name for all our programs, a Dja Dja Wurrung word meaning ‘altogether’) has now been running for seven

years. We believe because of this program our kids know and are proud of who they are. They gain strength from it and from each other. Our young people are writing and sharing their ideas about the world. For instance one of our kids wrote a book and she was interviewed by ABC Education. The book, *My Culture, the Beach and Me*, is written by Grace Coff who is a proud Yorta Yorta girl living on Jaara Country. She writes about her beliefs in Culture, Country, her respect for her Elders and the difficulties at times she faces about being an Aboriginal person with pale skin and how “being Aboriginal is in her heart” (Coff, 2017).

Our students are also building relationships in new ways. They have strong relationships with each other, and are mentoring each other within the group. Older students are supporting younger ones. Our students are also supporting their non-Indigenous teachers in new ways when they are in their mainstream classrooms. They know they are part of making change – they know they have a voice and they use it to make a difference. Engagement and attendance rates have improved and teachers and principals are supportive and engage with Indigenous content.

The Meeting Place has made a difference to our young peoples’ aspirations and career pathways. Many have now completed school, apprenticeships, traineeships, and have enrolled in University. We support the organisations and our kids through this. Many of these kids were ones on whom the system had given up. As stated by one of the young participants involved in the Meeting Place, “If we didn’t have it [Nalderun] I’d be sad. I’d do nothing. ... It’s important because you get to hang out with your own culture and history ... It’s good to be together as a community” (Moxham, 2018, p. 7).

As Nakata writes, unless we can build relationships at the cultural interface we cannot address the “contested space between Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people, and that body of knowledge of Australia’s Indigenous people that establishes the order of things to the ways we can and cannot understand each other” (Nakata, 2011, p. 2). Unless we model a way to be every day, things will not change. In the Meeting Place, it just took a small group of people who had the same belief in wanting change, to change the whole belief of a community.

Final suggestions

It is important to note that non-Indigenous people can teach using Indigenous pedagogies. They can also teach Indigenous content, but it is vital that when doing this, Aboriginal protocols are followed. This means acknowledging where the knowledge comes from. As a teacher, if you introduce any content or new ideas based on Indigenous knowledge, try and follow these simple rules:

1. Acknowledge the person or people who created the content. Published material is best as it then stays the property of the people that created it and is okay for it to be used;
2. Acknowledge the mob(s) or language group(s) that live on Country near to your school. This can occur by using local maps from your local Indigenous

- Corporations, pictures of Country or even have Google Earth running on the smart board in their classroom;
3. Introduce Country appropriately – describe where is it in relation to your classroom. Consider your teaching in relation to the area, taking into account the flora, fauna, the climate and other environmental factors.

Recognising the Indigenous worldview can no longer be an ‘add-on’ to our curriculum. It is something that can and should be shared with all our students. As teachers we can combine it as a new pedagogical approach that brings both worldviews together, much as a conglomerate rock brings together different particles as a whole. By doing so we can teach in ways relevant for all our students.

Conclusion

Teachers need to be aware that this is a learning journey for us all. There are no simple answers, but what is important is to make a start. I have seen many times teachers wanting to learn and trying to get it right for Indigenous students, and this makes a huge difference. Providing opportunities to learn through Country supports our kids to feel respected. That is, incorporating Country into the curriculum for all students is a critical step for Indigenous education. Learning on and through Country, understanding and changing your worldviews involves opening your heart and mind to another way of seeing the world, and together this enables a ‘shift’ to a strengths-based approach, but we need to continue to move forward together.

Reflective questions

1. How would you identify your own worldview?
2. How do you think you could include Country in your teaching?
3. What could students learn about Country?
4. How do you think as a teacher you could become an agent of change?

Acknowledgement is given to Aunty Julie McHale’s development of the framework ‘YOE: respecting, Yourself, Others and the Environment’. This chapter is written in her honour. I would also like to thank Jo Lampert for her ongoing support.

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