

Country with Angela Dean
(T: Tracey, K: Katelyn, A: Angela)

- Intro: 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 Meanjin. 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 and curriculum.
- K: Our theme for this episode is based on the principle of Country and I guest today's Associate Professor Angela Dean from the School of the Environment at the University of Queensland. Welcome.
- A: Thank you.
- T: Welcome Ange. Can you introduce yourself in any way that you feel comfortable?
- A: Okay, well given the topic I'm going to start with saying I am a non-Indigenous person. This area is new to me. I'm a social scientist who works in the conservation space so from a research perspective my work focuses on how we can encourage people of all sorts to participate in conservation practices and caring for nature. I've lived in Brisbane about 25 years and I grew up in south New South Wales in the home of the Dharawal and Gandangurra people.
- K: You teach a course called Environment and Society which is an introduction to physical and human geography. Can you tell us a bit about the course and how you're introducing Indigenous perspectives?

A: Thank you. Yeah, like you said, it's an introduction to geography and the way I like to describe it is sort of a tapas plate of all the different subdisciplines within geography. So the students get lots of different types of content. So there's five key modules all of which are taught by different academics. So there's human population and demography, there's climate science, there's an earth science and landscape formation module, there's a landscape use and agriculture module, and there's a people and nature module and that's the one I teach. Traditionally that people and nature content area was focused on people's relationship with nature and how we can promote positive stewardship action and positive aspects of environmental management so this felt like the perfect context to introduce new concepts about Country and caring for Country.

K: I really like how you described the course as a tapas plate of course.

A: I like food metaphors.

T: I like it too. So the design principle we are focusing on today is country and I just want to explain that in terms of Aboriginal understandings of Country. This is the land that we have inherent sensors of belonging with. So for myself when I know myself as a Ngugi woman then I am saying to everybody else I come from saltwater Country. We are talking about an island east of the capital city of Brisbane. So that's saltwater Country. In that sense of Country how do you ensure Country is centred in your teaching?

A: That's a great question and there's so many different ways to answer it. On the very practical level we've introduced two new lectures which focus on Country and there's two elements on that that I really want students to start thinking about. The first is I guess in Western science we love reductionism, we love breaking things down into singular components, and yet an Indigenous concept of Country based on my readings and discussions is so multidimensional. It's not just land, it's not just a tenure that we think of in a Western sense. It's much more complex that includes tangible and non-tangible components. So how to get students to lean into that complexity and be curious about it and not feel that I have to understand it all at once at the one time but be interested in that journey of developing our understanding in the future.

T: Do you think your students got it?

A: I find students are on such diverse journeys. Some students will have a bunch of content related to this in their schooling – so these are first-year students, first semester – so most of them are fairly young; 18 and straight out of school. What I'm going to do is get them to do a bunch of exercises before we start on this to start talking about parallel concepts. I'm not trying to say it's the same as Country, but for something like home, when we think about home that involves a bunch of tangible things like a house and the people in it but also a bunch of non-tangible concepts like our memory of the fun dinner that we had two weeks ago or your favourite dinner as a child or playing with your dog when you were younger. So our notions of home are an example I think where they can lean into something that's familiar and part of their own experience. And to say Country is different, it's not just a synonym for home, but it's another example of a multidimensional concept where all of these memories and experiences and non-tangible things are very much wrapped up in that sense of what it is.

- T: I think that's a good strategy.
- K: Ange, it's great to hear about how you're teaching students about the multidimensional layers and the complexity of Country. So this course that you've been telling us about is also part of a Teaching Innovation grant that we are all working on together and I wondered if you could tell us a bit about your experiences as a non-Indigenous person working on this project and do you have advice for other non-Indigenous people wanting to step into the space?
- A: So prior to being involved in this project I had considered introducing Indigenous content into this course. I thought it would be relevant and important for students but was really uncertain about the right way to go about it. I didn't want to introduce content that was inappropriate or not respectful. I didn't necessarily feel that it was appropriate for me as a less experienced and non-Indigenous person to step into that space. So being involved with this project has really helped me get over those hurdles. So talking to you guys and the team involved has in a way given me permission – that's air quotes permission – to step into this space and that it's okay for me to talk about a range of issues and that I don't need to feel that my approach had to be perfect before I did anything. The way you said to us in one of the meetings, Tracey: the step we take today will be better than the step we took yesterday, but the one we take tomorrow will be better again. I really liked that support that this is a journey we are starting on. We don't need to be perfect experts at the start of that journey.
- T: You must have had some challenges though, Ange.
- A: In a way, the challenges really sits at the personal level rather than the contextual level. So a lot of my research focuses on how we get people to adopt new practices and one of the findings that comes out in all sorts of areas and topics is that people are just full and they don't always have mental bandwidth to consider new content, new issues. So one of the challenges is making the space to jump into that content. It's fascinating. It's interesting. But we fill ourselves up and our schedules up all the time and so sometimes in the past we've had great aspirations of I want to do all this amazing stuff in my teaching, then by the time the semester comes around we do a more barebones version of that. So to make sure I was able to give this the time that I felt it deserved while also not falling prey to that need to be perfectionistic as a barrier. The other specific challenge for the course I guess was related to that, that feeling like I needed to know everything, I needed to be an expert, I'm not Indigenous and what I do with that. So again, talking to the broader support network, talking to you both in our meetings, has been really empowering to help me take those steps.
- T: I think too, you know, you need to be able to just hold that space in a 13 week semester course not because it's tokenistic but because you want to be real as well.
- A: One of the other challenges is there's so much. Once you start jumping into the content there's so much interesting stuff so then the challenge becomes what do I focus on in a limited time and reading interesting books and reports and then going, oops, I've got to actually deliver some focused content and stop reading all this fascinating stuff.
- K: The podcast is called Indigenising Curriculum in Practice. Is there one key thing you would like to add, Ange?

- A: What I would really like to add is an encouragement for people to creatively lean in, for want of a better phrase. I've chatted to some colleagues about this broader issue and some of them have described finding it challenging to think about how Indigenous-related content fits into their course and they think it's not for my course, it's only for these other types of courses where the content is obviously linked. I think the link for my course is quite straightforward but I would really encourage people to get into the space of being comfortable to be curious and to go, I can't see how this might fit but I'm really curious to have a think and a chat about what that might look like for different people. As academics ultimately we like to be curious. We don't always give ourselves time, as much as we would like to do that, but we get stuck in our heads as academics. We like to feel in control of our content. We don't want to step out of the comfort zone of our experience. But this sounds – and again, these sort of conversations now start to sound less scientific which I would probably use different language if I was talking to some of those colleagues – but would encourage them to approach it with an open heart. So to step away from our head knowledge and know that it's okay that we don't need to know the answer straight away. It's okay to ponder and be curious and begin that journey.
- K: Thanks Ange for sharing with us a bit about how you're stepping into this space and Indigenising curriculum in your geography course. I really liked how you talked about being curious and being brave and open to this space and to draw on your networks as well and listen to Indigenous colleagues for advice.
- A: And one extra thing is that no one's alone when they go into this space. I would encourage people to have both formal and informal chats with a diverse range of colleagues about this space and supporting any type of change but especially this type of change. Those networks are so important.
- K: Yes, and that importance of dialogue and working in collaboration. Thanks for joining us for another episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice.