



Virtual tours of Country: creating and embedding resource-appropriate Aboriginal pedagogy at Australian universities

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Abstract

At present, Western universities are undergoing structural and institutional change in response to the growing demands to provide additional on-line course and degree options, improve the recruitment, retention and support of Indigenous students, and undergo Indigenisation (of governance, the offered curricula, its faculty and campuses). In Australia, there have been increasing efforts to Indigenise curricula within law, humanities and the social sciences; prompting the formulation and execution of innovative pedagogical practices and online content. Efforts to harmonise these two emerging educational "frontiers" have been tried, one innovative measure trialled is the concept of virtual touring of Country alongside Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders, bringing together Indigenous epistemes and place-based learning. In analysing student unit evaluations, results indicate that students found the virtual tours of Country to be the most effective and meaningful aspect of the unit overall. We argue this demonstrates that what we call "digital place-based learning" is a useful method to engage undergraduate students in Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, whilst offering a unique experience across three regions.

Introduction

It has been well-documented that Indigenous culture, history and knowledge have not been acknowledged, taught or prioritised within universities across the Western world. Rather than being preserved, cultivated and valued as a “gift” (see Kuokkanen, 2011), Indigenous knowledge has been belittled, dishonoured and dismissed as primitive, irrelevant and insignificant (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Walter, 2014). At best, Indigenous ontologies and epistemes have been seen as something to learn about rather than from, included as periphery issues but not as integral components of the discipline (Hart et al., 2012). This absence of the Indigenous voice and perspective has not only been detrimental to Indigenous students on campus, but more broadly complicit in the neglect to challenge and correct racist perceptions and practices of our university-trained citizens, and curb the flow-on of these repugnant beliefs and behaviours into our society (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Bierman & Townsend-Cross, 2008). The de-valuing of Indigenous culture, knowledge and people is known to carry-over into the conduct of personnel within the criminal justice system (Blagg, 2016), healthcare system (Dudgeon, Wright, Paradies, Garvey, & Walker, 2014) and, perhaps most importantly for cultural change, the education system (Behrendt et al., 2012).

Over the 21st century, there has been a collective effort and agreement across the Western world to rectify the inequalities of, and discriminatory practices against, Indigenous people within the university sector (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Rigney, 2017; Riley et al., 2013). This movement, spurred by the advocacy of Indigenous persons across the preceding century, includes making available scholarships and bursaries, course pathways for disadvantaged or underperforming students, mentoring, employment (during and post studies), the provision of Indigenous-specific services and infrastructure, and most recently, the Indigenisation of the curricula. Changes to curricula are important for the reform of the educational (and more broadly, the cultural) landscape for Indigenous people, particularly in respect to shifting the habitus of non-Indigenous Australians (Bourdieu, 2013). The inclusion of Indigenous content across degree structures, or the creation of stand-alone Indigenous units within these degrees, have commenced across various Australian universities with favourable results reported (Gerard et al., 2018; Meyers, 2008; Nursey-Bray, 2019; Rigney, 2017). The success of such initiatives prompts consideration of how further content integration or specific course creation can be undertaken, as well as additional examination of initiatives which dare to utilise innovative means in their delivery; such as via online media (Nelson & Parchoma, 2018).

This paper examines what we argue is an innovative initiative from the University of Tasmania to harmonise the need to Indigenise the curricula and re-present Indigenous knowledge and an experience of Country through an online course equipped with high-definition lecture recordings on Country. Drawing on 41 anonymous student evaluations given between the years 2017-2019, we find that students believed the high-definition interactions (through virtual tours on Country) in an online course format to be engaging,

challenging and stimulators in student worldviews. From this we recommend how virtual tours on Country may form a resource-appropriate means of learning and teaching in a tertiary higher education setting and help to Indigenise the curricula. We acknowledge that this is not about financial efficiency. Rather, it is a resource-appropriate means, recognising that 1.5 million tertiary education students cannot be simultaneously out on Country for cultural and environmental reasons.

The Australian tertiary education context: Indigenisation and online course options

In 2018, there were nearly 1.56 million students enrolled across Australia’s 39 public universities, with 69.3 percent comprising of domestic students and 30.7 percent international students (Department of Education, 2019). As of 2018, there were 19,981 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student enrolments, 1.3 percent of domestic total enrolments (Department of Education, 2019). There remains inequality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in student numbers and employment. Specifically for Indigenous students, the enrolment percentage of 1.3 percent in 2018 is well below population parity of 3.1 percent (Department of Education, 2019). Further, completion rates of Indigenous students trail those of non-Indigenous Bachelor Degree completion rates over a nine-year completion period were 47 percent for Indigenous and 74 percent for non-Indigenous (Universities Australia, 2019).

In response to the lowered levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within the Australian university sector, Universities Australia developed the Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020 (hereinafter ‘The Strategy’, see Universities Australia, 2017). The Strategy incorporates some of the recommendations from earlier works such as the 2011 National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (Universities Australia, 2011), and the 2012 Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt et al., 2012). These documents obligate party universities’ (Australia’s public universities) commitment to initiatives to facilitate greater equity, equality and success for Indigenous students. One of the aims of the Strategy is to increase the engagement of non-Indigenous people with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, culture and educational approaches through curricula and graduate attribute re-development; which is part of the process of what is called curricula Indigenisation.

The concept of curricula Indigenisation emerged in the early 2000s to describe the efforts to transform universities to be more inclusive of Indigenous needs (viz. cultural safety), knowledge (epistemologies, ontologies), students and scholars (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004). As such, it incorporates a reorganisation of the existing paradigms and practices in the governance, administration, services (e.g. bursaries, support, campus resources) and pedagogies of universities to no longer be solely Western-focussed and marginalising of Indigenous people and perspectives (Kuokkanen, 2007). In the context of curricula specifically, Indigenisation entails the alteration of course content to incorporate and

teach Indigenous perspectives and knowledge alongside Western disciplinary norms, as appropriate to the subject area (Castellano, 2014). For example, a property law unit would incorporate an examination of traditional Australian Indigenous laws and customs pertaining to land and boundaries alongside the common law understandings, or Indigenous understandings of family and kinship being taught within a sociology course on family and socialisation (Gerard et al., 2018; Meyers, 2008; Mooney et al., 2017).

Australian universities commenced the curricula Indigenisation processes over the early 2000s, with institutions such as the Queensland University of Technology (in 2001), University of South Australia (in 2004) and Macquarie University (in 2012) executing audits of course curricula and the inclusion of Indigenous content (Mooney et al., 2017; Nursey-Bray, 2019). The move to Indigenise in Australia has been advanced by educational reviews such as the Bradley et al. (2008) review and the Behrendt et al. (2012) review, with all universities having expressed a commitment to this process as per the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020 (2017). Although at present there is no consensus as to how Indigenisation is to occur and to what extent, we have seen a number of scholars suggest that institutions create an introductory-level unit exploring Indigenous history (including colonisation) and culture to provide students with an insight into the Indigenous world and develop empathy with, and appreciation for, Indigenous people and cultures (Collins-Gearing & Smith, 2016; Lewis & Prunuske, 2017; Nursey-Bray, 2019). Importantly, curricula Indigenisation is not merely enacting a 'bolt on' of Indigenous content or ideas into a course, nor having an "Aboriginal do all the work", but rather, intentionally including content as an essential course component to enable students to learn from Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies, and integrate them into their own habitus (Bourdieu, 2013; Hart et al., 2012; Mooney et al., 2017).

In terms of online education, in recent years there has been an intensification of the demand for, and provision of, online course options for universities worldwide (Stone, 2017). Over the last several decades the student attendance profile has shifted towards a greater growth in part-time loadings and online loadings; with external enrolments having grown by over 100 percent from 2008-2017, and multi model enrolments increasing by an estimated 140 percent within the same period (Universities Australia, 2019). A number of factors have been identified as contributing to this development, including technological advancements (from audio cassettes to online lectures), an increasing demand for greater access to educational options, efforts for departments to cut costs, and the pressures to compete with other universities offering online course options (Helmi, 2001; Lai et al., 2016; O'Shea et al., 2015). Indeed, some argue that online course provision is an essential requirement for universities consequent to globalisation; universities can no longer monopolise geographical regions alone (Michael, 2012).

To date, there has been various Indigenisation and cultural safety initiatives which utilise technological and on-line media for content delivery (MacIntyre, 2016; Nursey-Bray, 2019; Page et al., 2019; University of Sydney, 2019).

Research has documented the efficacy of the use of video as evoking understanding and empathy within students, as well as to incite critical engagement (Gay, 2018; Grogan et al., 2019). Importantly for the purpose of Indigenisation, the more tangible and interactive nature of these more visual modes of education have been shown to be conducive to a challenging reconstruction of epistemological and ontological paradigms of students; one of the core goals of curricula Indigenisation (Acton et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2013; Nash et al., 2006; Nursey-Bray, 2019).

Methodology

This project involved the use of content analysis to examine the data collected from the institutional student evaluation comments for the unit 'XBR113 - Indigenous Lifeworlds: Local to the Global' collected between the years 2017-2019. The unit explores the lives of three Indigenous groups: the palawa (Tasmania), Noongar (Western Australia) and Navajo (Northern Arizona) (University of Tasmania, 2019b). It is based upon the theoretical concept of 'Lifeworlds', which incorporates a focus upon a person's subjective construction of reality and the intersubjective relations with others which contribute to the formation of this worldview (Husserl, 1970; Walter & Suina, 2019). Within this course, students are required to reflect on their own "lifeworld", its construction, and how it differs to that of the Indigenous peoples explored. This learning and reflexive practice is prompted via the provision of digital or visual tours of the country of the three aforementioned Indigenous groups, integrating authentic Indigenous perspectives and epistemes within lectures from Indigenous knowledge holders. These lectures, recorded in 2016, are delivered in high-definition and accessed by students via the unit's online portal (University of Tasmania, 2019b).

Content analysis is utilised in this paper to examine student responses within the end of semester unit feedback survey known as 'eVALUate' between 2017-2019. A total of 41 responses are examined, all of which are anonymous and non-identifiable, and are used by staff to assess teaching and curricula effectiveness and areas requiring further development (University of Tasmania, 2019a). As such, the relevant ethics committee advised formal ethical clearance is not required (NHMRC, 2018).

Content analysis can be understood as the examination of texts (e.g. newspaper articles, organisational reports) for the purpose of identifying and explaining patterns within texts (i.e. recurring words, phrases or ideologies within a political speech), evaluating and categorising collections of texts (e.g. policy written in advancement of a particular agenda, organising these according to theme), and identifying and analysing connexions between texts and the broader socio-cultural, socio-historical, and/or socio-political context (Churchill, 2019). Content analysis can be utilised in both a quantitative and qualitative manner; simply put the former involves the noting of occurrences of texts (words, phrases, documents) whilst the latter is interested in understanding the meaning behind these patterns and their interconnexion with other texts, and the broader context within which it exists (Churchill, 2019).

In this paper we specifically draw on responses to the question of 'what are the most helpful components of the unit?'. Using this variable, we analysed the data within for the occurrence of features that the students found beneficial (e.g. lecture content), which then formed the basis of our typologies (see Figure 1). Some student responses included more than one praise for the unit, and thus were thematically coded into more than one theme, with some responses included in up to four typologies. There is an average of 2.8 content units per response. All themes were thereafter quantified, tallying which appeared most frequently amongst all student responses, and then converted to percentages. In identifying that 'virtual tours of country' was the highest-scoring typology, we then re-analysed the data to further examine what aspects of this digital component were most beneficial for students. This process incorporated thematic coding and analysis to identify themes within the data (Mason, 2011; Saldaña, 2015).

Results

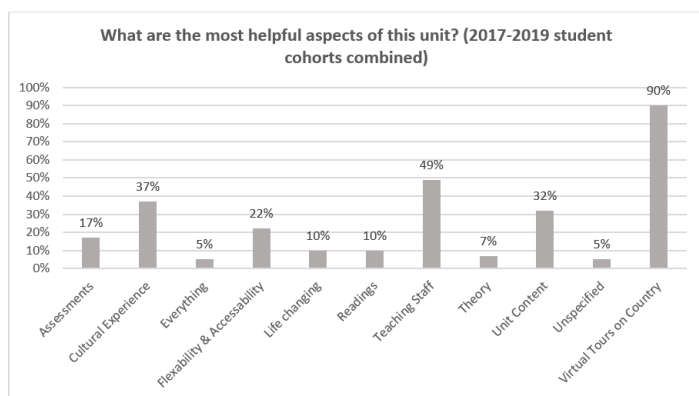


Figure 1: What are the most helpful aspect of this unit?

Thematic analysis produced nine unique themes: Assessments; Cultural Experience; Flexibility and Accessibility; Miscellaneous; Reading; Teaching Staff; Theory; Unit Content; and Virtual Tours of Country. Survey data found that the virtual tours of Country were identified by students as the most helpful aspect of the unit. Teaching staff, cultural experiences and unit content followed as recurring appreciated course components. Students also identified that assessments, course flexibility and accessibility (viz. online format), readings and theory were valuable components in the course.

Texts pertaining to virtual tours of country were then re-analysed and sorted according to three more specific sub-themes, as shown in Figure 2. We found that digital placed-based learning, that is the virtual tours of Country, was the most commonly provided positive feedback for the course (92% of students). This was followed by detailing the exploration of Indigenous perspectives and cultures by Indigenous knowledge holders (57% of students) and that the unit evoked a positive sentiment (22% of students).

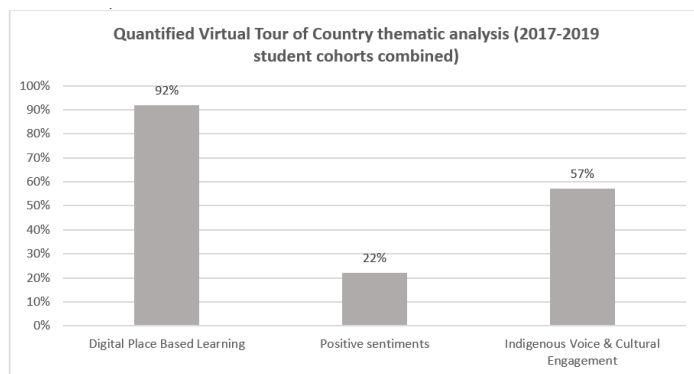


Figure 2: Quantified Virtual Tour of Country thematic analysis

Digital place-based learning

A total of 34 students (92%) expressed that digital place-based learning was an effective ('great') pedagogy through which they were able to readily engage ('useful learning platform'), and subsequently understand, Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and the sociological concept of Lifeworld. Students appreciated the overall construction of the unit, and found it conducive to their learning:

'The virtual tours were really interesting and a great way to learn.'

'The virtual tours of Country were fantastic, both as a learning tool, and a means of connecting students to Elders and Indigenous culture and knowledge.'

Students shared that the overall presentation of the unit content was thorough, and provided a unique departure from the traditional lecture format within the social sciences:

'The virtual tours around the three people groups was very well conducted, providing very deep and innovative learning experience.'

'Learning platforms offered in a range of ways from lectures to online content to virtual tours' [sic].

Most importantly, students appreciated the digital visits and presentations of country (three geographically unique locations in Tasmania, Western Australia and Northern Arizona), and the ability to acquire, notwithstanding remotely, a sense and feel for the land:

'I loved the structure of the lectures and online walking on country videos.'

'The walking on country taped videos for each section were a highlight for me as they showed the land, environment and we heard from local Indigenous elders from each of the three Lifeworlds.'

Indigenous perspectives and cultural engagement

The use of Indigenous perspectives was identified by students as central to virtual tours of Country becoming the most helpful aspects of the unit. Having Indigenous knowledge holders be the people to provide instruction in

Indigenous epistemes and perspectives, rather than non-Indigenous persons was well received as 'insightful':

*'Lectures from Indigenous people.
'Having the country walk through. It was to get insight and learn from the elders of the communities'.
'I enjoyed the virtual tours the most. [name] provide great insight, and learning about [location] was a first for me'.
'The virtual tours on Country by Elders were instructive and gave insight into the course content'.
'It opens up experiences that I would most probably never encounter'.*

Students found that they were able to partake in deep and meaningful cultural engagement, learning about Country (land/nature), cultural objects and tool and spirituality consequent to the virtual tour format and the instruction received:

*'The virtual tours were great as they gave you a deeper understanding of the connections to land and the culture of Indigenous people'.
'I really enjoyed this unit. It was a very unique learning experience to be able to hear the Elders of the various groups talk about their cultures and experiences. The content was sufficiently varied and interesting, and I loved the way the course combined so many different aspects, including history, spirituality/religion and social issues'.*

Positive sentiments

The virtual tours of Country were found to have evoked positive responses within students in their learning about Indigenous lifeworlds. Students reported experiencing a range of encouraging sentiments, from having 'loved' and 'really enjoyed' what was described as an 'excellent', 'informative' and 'very very moving' [sic] course. This range of favourable sentiments suggests an eagerness amongst students to engage with unit content, learn from Indigenous lifeworlds, and develop greater appreciation for learning about conceptually difficult topics such as epistemological and ontological differences:

*'The virtual tours were very interesting. I enjoyed learning about the palawa Aboriginals. Would have like to hear more from Uncle [name] when he went to the Perth Hills to tell about Noongars. Loved the way MOOC was presented, very interesting and an excellent way to learn'.
'I loved the structure of the lectures and online walking on country videos. This is my first sociology unit and I really enjoyed it'.
'Firstly, definitely the experiences of the virtual On Country experiences with Indigenous Elders; they were informative and very, very moving'.*

Discussion: virtual tours of Country

The student evaluation qualitative survey data have shown that the virtual tours of Country in the unit XBR113: Indigenous Lifeworlds: Local to the Global provide an innovative and resources-sensitive means by which students may travel through (as it were) Indigenous country, epistemes, culture and perspectives, and experience cognitive and sentimental engagement. Figure 3 encapsulates the benefits or 'fruits' of the virtual tours of Country identified by the student evaluations, noting the relationship between the unit's structure, engagement and positive learning outcomes. Figure 4 adopts a more macro perspective of the course, identifying from the dataset the key influences from the course upon the lifeworlds of students as the product of cognitive and emotional engagement spurred by the presentation and structure of the unit and its content.

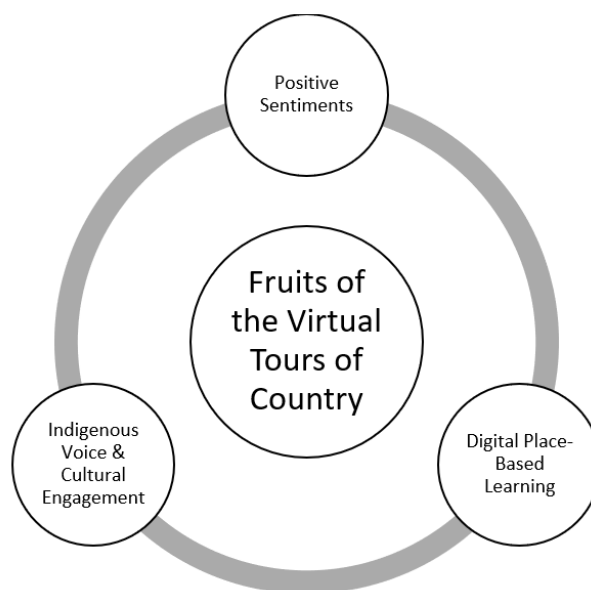


Figure 3: Key components of the virtual tours of Country

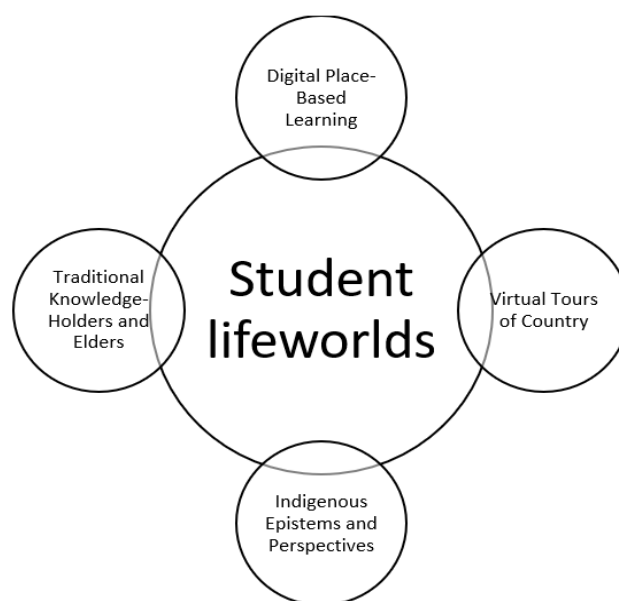


Figure 4: Key influencers of the unit shaping Student Lifeworlds

¹ Our attention here is primarily to Indigenous knowledge holders, Elders and community members, see below.

The data demonstrates that the incorporation of Country tours within an online delivery platform was well received. Students appreciated the ability to experience, albeit from a screen, tours of Country; enhanced by the high-definition quality of the video recordings. Similar to findings from Grogan et al. (2019), the invitation provided to students by Indigenous Elders and senior knowledge holders to virtually share their knowledges were welcomed as an engaging method of learning. This not only because of its visual appeal, but also insofar as knowledge was contextualised on and to country. This is vital given the importance of Country to Indigenous communities (Dudgeon, Wright, et al., 2014; Kingsley et al., 2013) and how it is interwoven with inherent cultural epistememes and knowledges.

This approach was shown to be fruitful in assisting in the cognitive and emotional engagement with Indigenous culture, perspectives and practices, with students expressing an appreciation of and for the Indigenous knowledge-holders and the information they shared in the digital lectures. This is a desired for result for the unit, that students would learn from the world's oldest living cultures (Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014) and assist in developing greater cultural awareness and understanding, as well as greater degrees of reflexivity amongst students trained in Australian universities. More broadly, we observe indications of students holding their own lifeworld under the microscope, with some comparing their own epistemology, ontology and axiology to the Indigenous people groups within the unit (Husserl, 1970; Walter & Suina, 2019).

The sharing of history, contemporary stories, culture and knowledge by Indigenous Elders and senior people prompted favourable sentimental responses within students. Responses showed that being taught by these figures moved participants on an emotional and personal level, leading to admiration and empathy rather than the typical recoil and resistance seen within white fragility. 'White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves' (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). Rather than negative emotional reactions, disengaging behaviours and reactionary claims, students expressed appreciation for what was taught, a willingness to learn, and humility in reflexivity. We argue that such findings are encouraging in light of the troubling nature of race relations in Australia (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Habibis et al., 2016).

Finally, we contend that given the student evaluations, the teaching methods of digital place-based learning provide an innovative model that ought to be considered by tertiary institutions in their curricula Indigenisation processes. Alongside the favourable responses detailed above, it should too be considered that the digital format assists Indigenous communities in easing the burden of what could be annual visits to country and/or requests to give lectures and workshops. In addition, the unit can be argued to serve as a time capsule in collating and preserving Indigenous knowledge, alongside filming of preserved country. With universities having committed to the Indigenisation process (Universities Australia, 2017, p. 14), the online option provides flexibility in its access and opportunities to be seconded and utilised in alternative forums (e.g. staff introduction days).

The unit too demonstrates how other knowledge systems can be respectively prioritised (Connell, 2007) and how it can contribute towards the development of graduate cultural competency. Furthermore, it contributes to greater equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas such as health (Dudgeon, Milroy, et al., 2014) and education (Walter et al., 2017). Greater attention to these areas facilitates greater outcomes for Indigenous peoples, for example, in the training of physicians, course content on the interconnection between social disadvantage and health can assist doctors to better relate to, acquire rapport with, and thereby treat their Indigenous patients in rural and urban centres.

Limitations

While the unit is innovative and the testimonies given for it by students are favourable, we caution that this pedagogical model should be seen only as a concession to learning from Indigenous knowledge holders vis-à-vis and on Country in situ. Notwithstanding the aforementioned arguments for the unit, insofar as the assistance it provides to Indigenous communities (in terms of resources) and the preservation of land, we recognise the online format poses several risks including: isolation (students never meeting and talking with an Indigenous person); becoming a tick-a-box exercise ('I've speed-watched through the videos rather than interacting with the videos'), limited engagement (minimal participation on online discussion forums), and; selectivity as to course content (only completing the readings, rather than having to interact with Indigenous knowledge). We also recognise the risk that the online unit could lead some students to perceive Indigenous knowledge holders and knowledge as an artefact to be watched, rather than as living epistemological and ontological frameworks in everyday use amongst Indigenous communities worldwide (see Yunkaporta, 2019).

We too recognise the limitations of the 'eVALUate' student feedback survey. The researchers did not conceptualise survey questions, but rather they are a generic list developed by the University. Student participation in the survey is optional; a larger sample may diversify the findings as to the overall reception of the unit. Accordingly, further studies regarding the effectiveness of virtual tours of Country and digital place-based pedagogy would benefit from developing more specific questions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that virtual tours on Country are received positively by students, evoke encouraging emotional responses towards Indigenous lifeworlds, and are a resource-sensitive teaching tool to Indigenise curricula within tertiary education. These findings are important considering the wider direction of Australian universities towards curricula Indigenisation and further provision of online course options, and as such provide a case study for how Indigenous epistememes and perspectives may be taught in a manner students find stimulating, insightful and moving. However, we note that caution should be employed when

considering the usage of Indigenous digital place-based learnings. They should not replace authentic experiential learning on Country or in nature with Indigenous people. Rather, their usage needs to be thoughtfully weighed up with the practicality of transporting entire class cohorts onto Country; videlicet a university using a local community site to teach about Indigenous culture and Country may cause irrevocable cultural and environmental damage. This is particularly true when considering the nearly 1.6 million tertiary education enrolled students in Australian universities (Department of Education, 2019). Furthermore, it is important that there is a bona fide intention underpinning the creation and provision of such courses, and that there is an appropriate quid pro quo between the university and the Indigenous community (adequate financial payment for community members involved in course/content creation, that there is an honouring of and respect for persons, service and content) in line with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS, 2012). This teaching method may also reduce risks associated with physical on Country trips.

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