

Online Corroboree in Covid-19: The ‘song and dance’ of being an Indigenous researcher

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Abstract

All students who undertake postgraduate study can experience feelings of isolation. However, First Nations students bear additional burdens due to the limited number of fellow Indigenous HDR students. These feelings have been compounded by strict isolations rules and university campus closures during the Coronavirus pandemic, with First Nations students also carrying the concern of our families being of greater risk of more serious illness with the virus.

As a response to the Coronavirus, an online reading and yarning group was created for Indigenous higher degree research students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Queensland. Weekly sessions via zoom allow students to connect with each other and academic literature in a culturally safe space within their own discipline, guided by an Aboriginal academic who supervises many of the participants. The group comprises of First Nations peoples from Australia and a Maori participant located in Aotearoa (New Zealand), all at various stages of candidature. The space fosters deep reflective conversations about our standpoints, Indigenist theories and methodologies, and general yarning to share our stories, knowledges and experiences.

This paper shares our reflections about how the virtual *Reading and Yarning* group, which we feel as diverse First Nations peoples gathering has become like a modern-day corroboree, has improved our ability to learn the song and dance of academia. Drawing on Uncle Ernie Grants pedagogical framework, the reflections will be framed around land, language and culture in how we have adapted to continue our journeys in completing our research studies.

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Introduction

It is well recognised that attrition rates of Indigenous Higher Degree by Research students (HDRs thereafter) are higher than non-Indigenous HDRs. Overcoming social and cultural isolation remains a real challenge for Indigenous HDRs, who often report of a multitude of additional barriers we face when embarking on HDR study (Moreton-Robinson, Anderson, Blue, Nguyen & Pham, 2020). To combat this, both formal and informal networks are often created to ensure connectivity and community support, with these networks having been identified as a key success factor for Indigenous HDR students in completing their studies (Barney, 2018).

Within the current global situation, in the middle of what is a one in a century pandemic, it could be argued that connection for Indigenous HDR students is more important than ever. As First Nations students, we carry the concern of our families being at greater risk of more serious illness with COVID-19, amplified by the fact that many regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been in lockdown. In addition to COVID-19 related strains, we also feel pain and distress for our national and international brothers and sisters during the Black Lives Matter movement. While interpersonal connectivity has been tested during self-isolation, the closure of university campuses has fostered innovation in the way Indigenous networks are formed and maintained. This innovation can be seen in the *Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (UQ) Reading and Yarning Group*, created and led by Marnee Shay, an Aboriginal academic in our faculty. The group comprises of First Nations peoples from Australia and a Māori PhD candidate, located in Aotearoa (New Zealand), all at various

stages of our HDR candidature. The reading and yarning group fosters deep reflective conversations about our standpoints, our place as Indigenous peoples in the Westernised academy, how to stay well and motivated, as well as sharing literature we are reading as there are many connections between our research topics.

For over 65,000 years (Clarkson et al., 2017), Indigenous Australians have occupied the land we now call Australia. Corroborees have always been a time for Indigenous peoples to connect, often through song, dance and storytelling, in order to celebrate and share knowledges (Langton, 2019). This paper shares group member reflections about how our Reading and Yarning group has fostered a sense of community during Covid-19, with the purpose of learning and understanding the ‘song and dance’ of academy. In this way, we carry on the tradition of connection through corroboree, but in an online format. Drawing on Uncle Ernie Grant’s pedagogical framework (Grant, E. as cited in QCAA, 2010), the reflections will discuss how this group has been useful in privileging our voices while navigating and analysing the landscape, language and culture of the academy.

Online Corroboree

The group consists of six HDRs supervised by Shay (Indigenous Australian: Beth Madsen, Ren Perkins, Emma Olssen, Llewellyn Williams and Annette Simpson) one Māori HDR from Aotearoa New Zealand (Toni Torepe), and two Indigenous HDRs from the HASS Faculty (Mitchell Rom (Education) and Sasha Purcell). The group met weekly for 1.5 hours online via zoom between April and August, when university campus closures were in place. As COVID has ‘normalised’ and campus’ have begun to reopen, we now meet fortnightly. Most weeks we will allocate a reading by Indigenous authors and discuss for part of the session. Our reading and yarning group allows us to connect with each other, our supervisor/mentor/s and other

academics invited into the yarning circle, and Indigenous and discipline-specific academic literature in a culturally safe space.

For months prior to Covid-19 arriving in Australia, I had the idea of wanting to create a regular group catch up and connect all the Indigenous research students I am supervising. I know how important community and connecting are for us and there are many threads of commonality and purpose across our group. Like many Indigenous academics, I feel the impact of low Indigenous academic numbers through being in demand across the areas of teaching, research and service. As Covid-19 started to cause university closures and travel cancellations of research fieldwork, this enabled me to initiate the reading and yarning group online. I decided to do it weekly as I knew now, more than ever, connection was vital in trying to support mob with their projects. The group has evolved in an organic and emerging way (as it does with mob) but really, I wanted to listen to what people felt they needed at this time as well as making sure everyone is feeling connected and supported. Since starting in March, we have almost full attendance every week and I have to say it is a highlight of my week as well. There is nothing more energising and inspiring than getting to be part of the journey of our future research leaders. - Marnee Shay.

Framework

Uncle Ernie Grants holistic framework (Grant, 1998) recognises the interconnectedness of Indigenous knowledges. Uncle Ernie's framework provides a tool to analyse how land, language and culture are interconnected within the contexts of time, place and relationships (Grant, 1998). As Indigenous HDR students, our environment is the Westernised academy, and thus our use of Uncle Ernie's holistic framework has allowed us to Indigenise our reflections, as a deliberate act of decolonisation.

In preparing for our weekly HDR reading and yarning group, I came across a short video produced by the Queensland Department of Education of Jirrbal Elder, Uncle Ernie Grant (Queensland Department of Education, 2016). The video resonated deeply with me in reflecting of our HDR reading and yarning group. As we navigate academia as Indigenous HDRs, we aim to find the harmony between two cultures whilst maintaining our distinct Indigenous identities. Uncle Ernie points out two key elements for Indigenous peoples: the environment of which we belong to and social connections between people. As we gathered each week as Indigenous HDR students not only do we have a sense of belonging within the environment of the academy, we nurture the elements of research knowledge and the cultural respect of the relationships amongst our fellow HDR Indigenous students. – Llewellyn Williams.

Land

As Indigenous researchers who are all involved in Indigenous education or Indigenous studies, we are well aware of the historical and political context of the academy and its exclusion of Indigenous peoples and knowledges (Nakata, 2007). The University of Queensland (hereafter UQ) was built on Indigenous land and is situated in Meanjin (Brisbane) on Jagera and Turrbal land. As researchers, we pay our respects to the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. During the COVID-19 global pandemic and despite not being able to physically attend UQ campus on Jagera and Turrbal land, we have managed to stay connected and support each other as an academic group. At the beginning of our rather informal sessions, as part of cultural protocol we commence with acknowledging the many Indigenous lands that we belong to and are all situated on and ‘zooming’ in from. We understand that we are all located on many different Indigenous countries that each hold personal significance and importance to our ontologies as Indigenous peoples.

As we look forward into an ever-changing learning and teaching landscape, whilst at the same time navigating the Westernised discourses of the institution, we strive to remain positive and provide each other with academic, political, social and cultural strength in a safe online environment. We will continue to discuss serious, important education and Indigenous issues that affect the daily lives of Indigenous peoples and learners. Furthermore, we will continue to remain both personally and professionally aware that Indigenous sovereignty across Australia has never been ceded and that our education institutions are built and situated on Indigenous lands where the knowledges and rich perspectives of Indigenous peoples remain still, even to this day, undervalued and underappreciated. Striving to Indigenise and decolonise the university remains at the very centre of our efforts and work. – Mitchell Rom.

Language

According to Bond (2018) “the foundations of our most learned institutions [including UQ] were built upon the premise that the Aborigine was not human, and thus incapable of learning or knowing” (para. 5). This statement provides a level of contextualisation towards our presence in relation to conducting research within the academy. As beginner researchers, we are learning to navigate a historically Westernised space, requiring us to find our own voices in order to share our stories, and therefore use language to challenge dominant colonial ideologies within the institution.

This form of modern-day corroboree allows us to share and learn together. As our old people before us travelled across the lands to sit together and exchange, celebrate and share their stories, so do we in the form of Zoom meetings. We can have realistic and robust conversations combining academic and our own common language, Aboriginal English. Most First Nations peoples traditionally come from an oral society (Absolon & Cam, 2005). We enjoy and gain so

much from 'a good yarn'. -Annette Simpson.

As an Indigenous PhD student, undertaking research within the westernised epistemologies of the academic world has presented barriers, especially considering my research is community-based. This challenge has been made more difficult within the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have found the Zoom Yarning Circle sessions a virtual PhD lifesaver. It has allowed me to voice my challenges within a culturally supportive environment with other Indigenous academics. Within this space, I have developed relationships with the other Indigenous academics involved in the Yarning Group, who have shared their challenges and stresses as well. A major positive for me has been the opportunity to break down the academic language of education by providing a strength-based Indigenous space to articulate from an Indigenous standpoint. This has given me the confidence to locate my voice within the research and to support the research of my Indigenous academic Brothers and Sisters. – Ren Perkins.

Culture

Smith (2005) wrote “an important task of indigenous research in “becoming” a community of researchers is about capacity building, developing and mentoring researchers, and creating the space and support for new approaches to research and new examinations of indigenous knowledge” (p92). As a research community studying across different areas within the HASS faculty, we quickly discovered our shared drive to make systemic change through the pursuit of decolonisation of policies, systems and discourses. Sharing of ideas, methodologies and theoretical perspectives has led to a group culture of support and respectful conversation.

Most of us have designed our research utilising Indigenous methodology and conceptual frameworks as, is our custom, and right. However as Indigenous scholars there is always a struggle for our cultural knowledge and practices to be accepted as valued and rigorous

scholarship. For example, we utilise storytelling and yarning as a qualitative method of research, however many schools do not acknowledge this as a valid form of interview method research. We also have an ethical and cultural responsibility to undertake our research respecting our Indigenous custom and lore. This may mean that what is accepted in a University setting as norm may not be accepted in community. Utilising this modern-day corroboree and being able to connect with Indigenous scholars, academics, mentors and most importantly, Elders, allows us all the opportunity to come together to overcome these obstacles, support each other and lift each other up. – Sasha Purcell.

As a remote part time Māori PhD candidate working full time in New Zealand the feeling of isolation has travelled with me throughout my PhD journey. While I have communication with my advisors, the relationship with my Australian whānau (extended family) offers opportunities to share experiences and manaakitanga (support) with other Indigenous students. As the latest newcomer to this group, I have been welcomed unreservedly by my Australian mob and value these relationships and connections I have built in recent months. The importance of this group became particularly evident during the months of national lockdown when online communication was the sole means of interaction and connectivity with people outside of our home bubble. The weekly meetings became a highlight of the week; energising and stimulating in dialogue but also supportive and motivating during the unprecedented times of a global pandemic. I have continued to prioritise our group meetings as we begin to construct our new post Covid-19 sense of normality. – Toni Torepe.

Conclusion

The yarnning group is an embodiment of our connections to culture, each other, our environment, beliefs, values and experiences. It provides us our safe space to yarn, share and challenge the status quo. – Emma Olssen.

Throughout all these reflections, the reoccurring theme is the importance of interconnectedness and interpersonal relationships for Indigenous HDR students, especially during these unprecedented and unpredictable times. *The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (UQ) Reading and Yarning Group* allows us to connect, and feel connected, within the virtual learning space in which we now find ourselves. This online corroboree has empowered us, as Indigenous HDRs to understand our shared goal to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples, and thus work collectively towards decolonisation. Therefore, it is pertinent that we continue to stoke the fires of our modern-day corroboree, to ensure our voices are privileged, contributing to the knowledge for future generations to come.

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