

Learning from Country

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Katrina Thorpe

Interviewed By:

Professor
Susan Page

Dr Katrina Thorpe is the Chancellor's Post-doctoral Indigenous Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges (CAIK) at the University of Technology Sydney. We talk to Katrina about her research project called Learning from Country in Teacher Education in Australia and Canada. The project's focus is on enabling the voices of Aboriginal people to be heard in relation to working with pre-service teachers around learning on Country.

“Yarns are really about hearing stories of experience and having the reflective conversations and dialogue.”

Katrina discusses the research design and processes that support community-led partnerships in the research. This includes building reciprocal research relationships to give community members the time needed to be involved in decision-making, for example in reviewing documents and works-in-progress. These are ongoing relationships that stretch out beyond the ethics consent process to keep community informed and in the driving seat. Katrina's approach to ethics is that it is not a one-time thing, it is something that is constantly being negotiated with community research partners throughout the life of the project and beyond.

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About Katrina

Dr Katrina Thorpe (Worimi, Port Stephens NSW) is the first Chancellor's Postdoctoral Indigenous Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges. Katrina's research will focus on examining innovative educational approaches that engage teacher education students in "Learning from Country" experiences in Australia and Canada.

Katrina is passionate about developing culturally responsive pedagogies that facilitate connections between students and Aboriginal people, communities and Country. In her work she continues to support future and in-service teachers who are developing an Aboriginal education activist identity and want to connect with others who share a commitment to social justice in Aboriginal education. Katrina has 20 years experience teaching mandatory Indigenous Studies across a number of disciplines including education, social work, nursing, health and community development.

SP Can you tell us about your research, what led you to it?

KT My research has been fermenting as an idea for probably two decades or more. I've been involved in teacher education over this period, teaching mandatory Indigenous Studies units and taking students out on Country to learn from Aboriginal Elders and community members working in a range of different government and non-government organisations. I've had some wonderful opportunities, particularly in elective units, to enhance student learning by going out with Elders to learn the different layers of meaning of Country in the city. Students often hold a stereotype that Aboriginal people predominantly live in the "the outback" or in rural areas, so it's essential that preservice teachers start to think about all the places around us as being Aboriginal Country—there is a long history and connection to place wherever you are in the Australian continent. So with that in mind, it's important to educate the future generations of teachers about that and inspire them to engage with Aboriginal communities, build relationships and find ways to build Aboriginal perspectives into their teaching.

My research grew from my personal experiences at school, university and later my teaching at university. Teacher educators who work in Aboriginal education are always thinking about ways to engage students, particularly the resistant students, or students who have never met an Aboriginal person. We often hear from preservice teachers that they've never had the opportunity to meet an Aboriginal person. Learning from Country is a way of connecting people personally and building relationships. One of the things that is reinforced in educational policy is that to become an effective teacher, you need build relationships with parents and communities. The research is also a way of discovering how teacher educators can model those relationships to preservice teachers and inspire them to work with Aboriginal

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people when they start teaching. The research began by wanting to know more about what the preservice teachers are experiencing and learning when they go out onto Country with Aboriginal people.

Initially, when we interviewed preservice teachers about their learning experiences while on Country, we could see that it was quite transformational for those students. Then, as we were working with Aboriginal people, it was essential to hear their voices as well. Rightly, much educational research about going out on Country has focused on student learning and some teacher educators have written about the significance of taking students onto Country from their professional lens. In my project at UTS, and with a team of cross-institutional researchers, my research has shifted focus to include deeper engagement with Aboriginal communities, educators and Elders to hear their voices. This focus has become important—to think about Aboriginal voices, Aboriginal self-determination, the significance of the learning experiences, and the engagement with preservice teachers from Aboriginal community perspectives. To hear what knowledge and experiences they are hoping to impart in relation to Country—for example their knowledge of local political histories or the ecology of the places that we're visiting. We are really interested in hearing what community members hope to get out of it, what legacy they hope to leave.

Some of the Elders that we work with have had quite difficult experiences in education, so they're passionate when they talk to preservice teachers. As one of the Elders said, in a recent interview, there's not a lot of time, there's no need to dilly dally around, we need to get straight to the point and tell the truth. They see it as a way of subverting all the layers required to have Aboriginal perspectives included in a classroom, they can talk straight to the future teachers and have their voice heard.

SP Can you tell us a little bit more about that relationship building, how did you begin those relationships in the research process?

KT The relationships have been built through prior connections and long held relationships that my colleagues and I have with individuals and organisations. Some of the

Aboriginal students we taught as preservice teachers are now in schools, however some have gone on and created their own businesses, which have an education offshoot as well.

It's from these connections where people are embedded in local schools and communities, and are part of the community for example through sport, volunteer work, or friends of friends. It grows, as you become connected with people in the community and we are hopefully part of the community in that way as well.

SP Can you tell me about some of the challenges?

KT This year, there have been big challenges, because one part of my work, one project that I'm trying to get up and running, has been affected by Covid. But in another way, it's opened up new opportunities as well, so that's been quite exciting.

The international component of my research suddenly fell away as Covid impacted on place-based teaching and international travel was banned. To get some exercise while in lockdown, I happened to be walking near my home and noticed a new Aboriginal artwork that may be an appropriate location for a placebased learning experience. I reached out to the organisation that developed the art project and from this contact, I now have another research area to explore—it's exciting. So even though I had difficulty due to Covid, it has opened up another locally based research project. You never know where a challenge might lead if you think about other ways of redirecting your energy, time, and knowledge.

My new project is emerging from our ongoing conversations—discussing ways we can connect, work together and support each other's work. It's been a conversation about what my research interests are, what research opportunities can come from the support of UTS and exploring what kinds of research processes and outcomes would be of benefit to the work they are doing in their local context. For example, we've been exploring research ideas that can help the community apply for funding. I had some good news the other day that the people I'm working with have sourced some funding for a 'placemaking' project.

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We're going to meet next week to talk about how we might conduct research as this project unfolds, documenting the stages that we're going through in placemaking and building knowledge around this particular site. That's quite exciting. We haven't worked out what exactly we're researching yet, but that's part of the conversation. It's about acting as a team, bringing our particular knowledges and skills together to work out how it can benefit both parties. It's reciprocal in that way.

I think in terms of ethics, that's a fundamental part of the process, and that takes time. That's the other challenge, the time that it takes. For example, I have a project where I wanted to get some interviews done a few weeks ago and time is ticking with the funding that I have. There are deadlines, but I see the benefit in taking more time. To have those conversations about working out the best ways forward, I think the project will be stronger in the long run if I don't push them to fit to the university deadlines.

People are busy. That's another challenge. The people that I'm working with all have careers and jobs that they're busy at too. Everyone's got competing demands. You have to find ways to keep chipping away and connecting. When I say chipping away, I mean with our ideas. Keeping the ideas on the agenda and having those conversations, meeting up and writing together. That's the other thing that I found quite useful, just having a shared document that we can dump some ideas in. Community partners do not necessarily want to write in the academic style, so they put their ideas down, and then I write it up, get their feedback on it, and it keeps documentation of our thoughts. In the end, we might be able to share with other people who may wish to do similar Learning from Country experiences, or placemaking, in a broad sense.

SP Is there anything else that you'd like to say about the way that you've thought about ethics in this project?

KT There's the formal ethics process that you go through with the university. It can be quite frustrating at times. I've found the UTS Ethics Committee very helpful in answering questions, and it does hone your thinking as well. Sometimes you might skip over an area, particularly even with things like



the consent forms. For example, with the local organisation I'm working with, the Aboriginal person that I'm working with was quite happy to give me some phone numbers and email addresses of potential participants. Because she's worked with them, she knows them very well and trusts me. She trusts me to contact them because we have a trust relationship. However, as the Ethics Committee pointed out, that really should be at arm's distance. So instead I will now get my Aboriginal colleague that I'm working with at the organisation to email the potential participants so there is no coercion.

It's an important process as it stops tricky situations from arising. The ethics process is really important in pointing out things that you may inadvertently do that are not appropriate, even though you are acting ethically in other areas. You are in a process with the people and organisations that you're working with. You've built trust, you're ensuring that your research brings reciprocal outcomes and is Aboriginal led, however there are still little things that you might miss. I think the ethics process helps you to pick up on those, to have another eye, or many eyes, reading over your document can give you some good insights.

SP Have you completed any data collection for the project?

KT Yes, I've done a lot of data collection with teacher educators. We have undertaken the interviews using Yarning as a method for data collection. It's been really useful for me, you have your research questions that outline the key areas that you're hoping to address, but those yarns, even on Zoom this year, have been very successful. Having people share their own story and expanding in their own way on the research themes.

The yarns have enabled a reflective moment for the teacher educators that I've been interviewing. People get so busy so the discussion points—the yarns have provided the opportunity to take time out and reflect. I've had feedback from the teacher educators that makes me think more about what I'm doing in terms of a decolonising project, and the significance of the work that I'm doing. They're reflecting on the semester, or the work that they're doing, and people are walking away, feeling quite pleased when reflecting on their

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achievements in spite of the challenges.

It is a privilege to have those deep conversations about the ways people are thinking about the work that they do. Conversations about what kind of future they're hoping to create for our future teachers, the Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in the classroom. I think people have always got those perspectives in mind.

SP How are you planning to share your findings?

KT There are different ways that I'm going to be sharing the findings and it depends of the project.

There are the traditional ways the research will be shared, for example I've just signed a book contract with three other colleagues and I will also be publishing in peer reviewed journals and presenting at conferences. However with the locally based project that I've just started with my colleagues, they inform me that although the organisation is not strictly an education provider, teachers nevertheless call them asking for help on how to embed Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. We're therefore going to provide links from their organisation to our *Learning from Country in the City* website, so teachers can make contact with Aboriginal Elders and community workers who are doing this work on Country. It will also be a way of connecting teachers to some resources. But

otherwise, I am still gaining permissions to share the findings, so there is not a lot more I can say at this stage until I work this out with my colleagues.

SP That's an interesting point because ethics is not a static thing as there are ethical decisions to be made along the way of a research project that are not decided at the beginning in an ethics form.

KT Definitely, it is an area where you have to maintain reciprocal relationships with community partners and check in with them, for example to see that it's okay to share certain information. Community partners are so busy that sometimes they take time to get back to you and it might hold something up. Still, you have to go with that and accept it as part of the process and wait before you share that information. I have to wait for someone to find the space in their day to read something and respond. Waiting for that process to unfold is challenging in the university setting.

This process can also delay research publications. That's why I've been talking about other outputs, because even though some of those outputs may not be academic papers, which is an important part of the research, I also have to find ways that we could share what we were doing in other forums that are useful for people that I'm working with—for example a story in the local newspaper, or creating resources on the website. I am trying to work out how to share knowledge in different ways that will benefit all of the stakeholders in the research. That takes time as well, but it's exciting. That's the privilege of it all, that you can sit down and have a conversation with people and think about how you're going to influence the wider community's understanding about the knowledge and information that is out there in the Aboriginal community.

It's about raising awareness, bringing people on board, teachers on board in a way that the community are happy with because the community are the knowledge holders. That's the other important part of my research, finding out from the knowledge holders

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how they want their knowledge of Country shared in specific educational contexts to ensure, for example, that teachers don't come in and misrepresent Aboriginal knowledge to their students. As teachers and researchers in this space we have the opportunity to model ethical practice to preservice teachers. Ultimately we want them to work alongside Aboriginal knowledge holders. It is about developing the protocols and knowledge about specific places that teachers and students can visit. Each place might have its own kind of protocol that teachers need to be aware of.

SP Would you like to share any further thoughts on ICIP and protocols around intangible knowledge, which you've just spoken about when designing a process between your research and the Elders? How did you negotiate rights with the Elders you work with?

KT We have built ways of protecting Aboriginal knowledge holders intellectual property in our research. That is through organising a number of yarning circles, where we give Elders time to have looked over their transcripts. Elders have been able to look at the emerging themes themselves and discuss with us what they want represented from their transcript. It's not just a matter of sending someone back their transcript and looking over it and asking what they want to be changed? It is not a yes, or no, experience. It is a process that takes time. We took a day sitting with Elders and community workers with the transcripts, talking about the research and where we're up to. We asked questions about what key themes they wanted to see us write about from their transcript. I think that's very important for the people that we're working with, to get a bit more of an insight into the research process as well. They can see and write things up for themselves when we talk about themes. Community partners have been quite happy to do that. We also make sure in that process that the Elders are paid for their advice and input. Being paid for their time becomes part of the research process as well.