

Chapter 16

An Indigenous Australian Cultural Competence Course: Talking Culture, Race and Power



Bronwyn Fredericks and Debbie Bargallie

Introduction

Cross-cultural training in its various forms has been around in Australia since the 1980s. It has primarily been viewed as a way of improving knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a means to improving service delivery (Fredericks, 2006, 2008; Fredericks & Bargallie, 2016). This led to government departments that serviced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognised as leaders in this arena, closely followed by other agencies who offered services. Over time, the training has developed and has come to be known as cultural awareness, cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, cultural safety, cultural sensitivity, cultural humility, cultural capability and a range of other names. Our literature review indicates that there is no consistent definition of “cultural competence” and no definition that is universally accepted. As a result, the terms have been used interchangeably even though each term accentuates particular nuances in context and aim. In Australia, the terms “cultural competence” and “cultural capability” have been primarily used in education, whereas models of cultural safety, cultural humility, cultural security and cultural competence have been associated with health care. The cultural safety model is more aligned to Canada and New Zealand, and cultural competence, or cultural competency (which term is more prominent in the USA). The term “competence” (or competency) implies a set of skills, knowledge and attributes that are obtained as a result of learning. Considering the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Australia, it is unrealistic to think that cultural competence could be measured or attained through ad hoc Indigenous cultural competence training courses, in a country where idealised and homogenised

B. Fredericks (✉)
The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
e-mail: pvcie@uq.edu.au

D. Bargallie
Griffith University, Mount Gravatt, QLD, Australia

visions of Indigenous culture are the object that oversimplifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and reinforces negative stereotypes. Increasingly, Indigenous cultural competence in Australia has been broadened out from the desire to improve service delivery, towards a strategy of decolonisation and anti-racist pedagogical approaches. Indigenous cultural competence curricula design and implementation are being more inclusive of Indigenous people's voices, worldviews, knowledges and pedagogies as key elements to address inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Numerous tertiary institutions additionally offer cultural competence training via their human resources department or professional training area or their Indigenous centre.

In this chapter, we focus on teaching Indigenous cultural competence training courses within Australian higher education institutions. Using one institution as a case study, we share how, as Indigenous designers, trainers and educators, we came to centre race within an Indigenous cultural competence training course. We offer our chapter to demonstrate how power, whiteness, race, culture and "other" interplay within such training. We now turn to our case study.

An Australian University Case Study

Central Queensland University (CQU) is a large, regional Australian university with 24 campuses, study centres and study hubs across Australia. It has a history in distance education through a range of online and flexible learning platforms. In 2012, the CQU Council approved an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy to further its commitment to improving Indigenous access, reconciliation, Indigenisation of curricula and cross-cultural training of staff within the university. The Office of Indigenous Engagement (OIE), at that time led by Professor Bronwyn Fredericks, was given the task of facilitating the University's strategic efforts regarding Indigenous engagement, the Indigenisation of curricula and cultural competence training.

In commencing the work of developing a cultural competence course, it was important to build on the evidence (Anning, 2010; Asmar, 2011; Butler & Young, 2009; Fredericks, 2006, 2008, 2009; Fredericks & Thompson, 2010; Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes, & Thomas, 2014; McLaughlin & Whatman 2007, 2008, 2011), including what had been undertaken in other Australian universities (Adams, 2010; Anderson, 2011; Arthur et al., 2005; University of Sydney, 2016). We additionally sought to incorporate the recommendations of those working in the sector (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; UA, 2011) and draw on our own experiences within higher education and other sectors.

Consultation took place across the university in terms of content, course length, mode of delivery, training locations, catering, resources and engagement with stakeholders, including traditional owners and elders. We were determined to develop a course that was not just an apolitical rehash of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history that failed to interrogate the role that race and racism have played in the

colonising project of Australia. Similarly, we were determined not to solely focus on cultural elements that fail to recognise the fluidity and diversity of Indigenous cultures and identities, situate Indigenous people within romanticist notions of culture that position Indigenous people as the exotic “other” and/or separate Indigenous culture into pre-colonial history and the now. We did not want to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the objects of the training. Bond’s (2014) work was important to draw on here; Bond warns that Indigenous educators can be easily objectified in the learning environment and advises us to focus on addressing some of the markers of objectification within the education setting. This often plays out in education environments via requests for and expectations of “Welcome to Country” and “Acknowledgement of Country” ceremonies, traditional dancers, smoking ceremonies, singers and elders talking about Aboriginal “Dreamtime” stories. While these types of activities might be enjoyable when incorporated into training and might offer an insight into some forms of Indigenous cultures (Fredericks, 2008; Fredericks & Thompson, 2010; Hollinsworth, 2013; Westwood & Westwood, 2010; Young, 1999), this does not mean that those activities change behaviour or challenge the way the organisation undertakes business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is hard to ignore the fact that Welcome to Country ceremonies is expected to be performed by people whose descendants have been dispossessed as a result of the colonial project, and this in turn can make the act of Acknowledgement of Country a mere performance. What makes these performances enjoyable to non-Indigenous people is the “pure pleasure of proximity to the exotic” where they can enjoy “Indigenous culture and presence without feeling threatened by Indigenous sovereignty” (Kowal, 2010). These types of training or activity do not challenge the way participants see themselves, their actions or their complicity in maintaining racial inequities. In fact, these types of training and activity have little relevance in terms of application to participants’ day-to-day work environments; there is extremely limited evidence that this type of approach advances the lives of Indigenous people.

Young’s (1999) work, together with the work of Brach and Fraser (2000), Campinha-Bacote (1999), Fredericks (2006, 2008), Spencer and Archer (2008) and others, offers numerous examples of problems when such training primarily focuses on culture. They all explain why training needs to centre race as the platform from which to open discussions on racism, privilege, discrimination and change. Lumby and Farrelly (2009) suggest that “content addressing racism, bias and discrimination needs to be included in any generic module of cultural competence training being undertaken by all staff and management”. They explain that this type of content in the training enables the capacity for individual change which can lead to organisational shifts. On understanding these arguments, we committed to developing a training course that would focus on contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities in all forms and real possibilities for connections with CQU staff. We wanted to challenge romantic and exotic notions of Aboriginality and Indigenous identity. Moreover, we wanted to challenge Eurocentric and “White” understandings of what culture is and is not, and what an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is and is not (Carlson, 2016; Fredericks, 2013; Gorringer, Ross, & Forde, 2011; Hollinsworth,

1992, 2013; Sarra, 2011). Statements about how someone looked or acted, and references to their Indigenous identity, had been raised numerous times by both students and staff across the university; this needed to be addressed in the cultural competence course for the university.

Before moving ahead with the development of content, a review of Universities Australia's *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (2011) also took place to ensure that the development of the course was aligned with the national platform and direction informing the sector. Last but not least, it was established that the course would be developed from our Indigenous standpoints, with race underpinning our theoretical perspectives. We drew on critical Indigenous studies and standpoints as a mode of analysis (Moreton-Robinson, 2009) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) as an epistemological framework for non-Indigenous participants to interrogate their own cultural positionings (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011), and for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants to examine institutional racism. The course needed to centre race and challenge thinking and behaviours. It needed to offer opportunities for participants to reflect on their own cultural identity, and white privilege, attitudes, prejudices and propensity to stereotype, challenge racism and promote anti-racism practices. In addition to this, the course needed to be accessible via a face-to-face course and an online teaching platform. This would enable accessibility to all staff across the wider CQU footprint, which included over 20 campuses and study hubs. It was our view that this approach would better contribute towards the CQU goals of inclusion, engagement and building cultural competence, rather than merely offering a course about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures that does not lead to the recognition of the changes—including the structural changes—required. We agree with McGloin and Carlson (2013) that critical thinking is a crucial element in the acquisition of cultural competence and sought to embed this in the development of the course.

Developing the Cultural Competence Course

In addition to drawing heavily on examples from the large evidence base, we discussed with others within the OIE what they thought should be in such a course. We began to map out specifically what this course needed to contain. Based on the evidence, it was essential in the first part of the course to introduce and examine colonisation and the history of Indigenous dispossession, removal, trauma and pain, along with the ongoing effects of historical and contemporary federal and state policies and legislations about Indigenous people that locate racism at the core of Australian politics. We also deemed it essential to present evidence of Indigenous resistance, agency and activism, and how this continues today. We argue that it is essential to provide critical historical context to understand the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The course demonstrates how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enact many forms of agency as a

form of resistance against the institutional racism embedded in policies and practices since the onset of colonisation.

The course's later sessions were developed to focus on participants' everyday work within the university. We knew it was important to discuss the concepts of race, racism, discrimination and white privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and how they play out within institutions such as universities. Drawing on the work of Bargallie (2020), we also wanted to demonstrate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience racism through systems and structures, in their everyday work with colleagues in large organisations, such as a university. Participants were to be asked to self-reflect on how matters of race impact on their own day-to-day lives.

The final session of the course we decided on required a discussion about CQU's commitment to "Closing the Gap" and reconciliation through its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The final activity would see participants consider what they could do in their workplace that could contribute to the implementation of CQU's RAP.

We believed this mixture of content would enable discussions that challenge stereotypes held of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and showcase how Indigenous people continue to demonstrate resistance and agency. We wanted participants to think about their positioning and how they could make a difference within their work with the university and within broader society (Westwood & Westwood, 2010; Young, 1999).

Beginning to Implement the Course

A two-day course was developed as a flexible learning course, which meant that some of the learning was to be online and some face-to-face. The full implementation of the course was to be trialled by offering it four times, across three campuses. This work was supported with funds from the Higher Education Participation Program and the OIE. Data, including written evaluations, was to be collected from each site. We additionally established roles for two colleagues—one non-Indigenous and one Indigenous—during the delivery of the first course. They were to assist in documenting the delivery of the course, including their personal observations. Before the implementation of the trial course, we were advised by senior management that it would cost too much if everyone wanted to undertake the course and leave their workplace for two days, and to cut the face-to-face component down to one day. This left us questioning the institutional commitment to the Indigenous cultural competence training in comparison with other staff development training. This chapter draws on observations and data collected from the first course offered. After the course was delivered for the first time, the content was fine-tuned, and other facilitators assisted with the delivery.

In understanding the delivery of the first course, what was strikingly obvious was the participants' body language and the questions they asked. When we, the

facilitators, talked about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the participants appeared interested and focused on what we were saying. When we moved the discussion to the participants reflecting on themselves and discussed issues of racism and privilege, they became uncomfortable. Some participants crossed their arms as if to shield themselves, while others found it hard to stay focused within the discussion. We did observe two participants writing notes to each other across the table during this time. The lead facilitator raised the discomfort some people may have been feeling, talked about how difficult talking about race and racism can be for many people and encouraged participants to stay engaged. The discussion that followed revealed how people struggled with focusing on white privilege, actively displaying their resistance via their contributions, or lack thereof, and ongoing body language. This observation by the facilitators was supported via the documentation of our two colleagues who were observing the delivery of the course.

DiAngelo (2012) explains how it is easy to be distracted by participants who dominate or, in this case, resist, and many facilitators spend a lot of time and energy trying to reign in these participants. In such cases, many educators tend to silence “race talk” to keep participants “happy” or from “getting upset” or “offended” (Castagno, 2008). As facilitators, and as Indigenous women, we participate in race talk along with managing racist practices and racist behaviours every day, in a range of environments. This provides us and many other Indigenous people with significant exposure to the discourses and practices taken up in racial dialogues that function to support white domination and privilege—a “whiteness” that is similarly identified by DiAngelo (2012).

We persisted to challenge the “white silence in these racial discussions” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 1) despite participants feeling uncomfortable. We continued to reassure participants that we were in a “safe space” to have these conversations. We took added courage from the work of DiAngelo (2012, p. 1) who states, “going against one’s grain for engagement, while difficult, is necessary and will result in the least harmful and most authentic and rewarding engagement”. To break the silence and engage in conversation, the lead facilitator used a number of strategies including asking questions to open up wider group discussion, asking participants to write down self-reflection responses to particular themes of discussion and breaking the participants into small group exercises. One of the difficulties that is not written about by DiAngelo is that we believe that some white people would rather listen and respond to white people regarding race, racism and white fragility, or to people such as DiAngelo, rather than Indigenous people or people of colour.

We also had to work through issues with a few Indigenous participants who had unknowingly been co-opted into supporting white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) and white privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1988; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Nicholl, 2004; Sullivan, 2006; Wellman, 1993). DiAngelo (2011, p. 54) describes “white fragility” as follows:

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

White fragility is used to defend white privilege. The term “white privilege” is defined as “the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed upon people solely because they are white” (MP Associates, 2019). During the lunch break, some non-Indigenous participants were voicing their concerns about what they considered to be “culture” with some Indigenous participants, and saying they had come to learn about the “little spirits” and “dot art”. This prompted one Indigenous participant to question the lead facilitator after the break about why we were interrogating race and racism. This was challenging and complex, in that the Indigenous participant had dismissed issues of racism as they impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and this was witnessed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. If we did not address this, it would be seen by some as also dismissing those issues, and by others as endorsing a position taken by only a small number of Indigenous people. While this was a difficult discussion to have, it was useful in demonstrating the hidden nature of whiteness issues, and how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be co-opted into the way whiteness has been historically constituted and normalised within mainstream Australian society.

We needed to address several difficult questions and a range of emotions expressed on the day. We understood that emotions are powerful in the learning process and need to be both harnessed and embraced. Emotions were expressed through some people revealing that they felt like a veil was lifted on the truth, and others needing to inform the group that they had recently discovered they may have an Aboriginal ancestor. Why were not they learning more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture? Why were we focusing on them? What about their experiences of having an Aboriginal friend, or an Aboriginal relative? A number of participants were pleased the discussion was so open. Some participants cried, expressing that they felt “sad” or “guilty” about what has happened to Indigenous people. And, while we did not accuse anyone of anything or say anyone was guilty of particular incidents, a number of participants stated that they were not happy feeling that they were being accused of past events for which they are not responsible. Some participants were vocal about working hard for what they had and should not be expected to “give up their backyard”. We know from the literature that such courses and conversations about race and racism often bring up participants own white fragility and their need to protect their white privilege (DiAngelo, 2012).

It is our view that there was no way to deliver this training without centring race and interrogating the stories of racism. Bargallie (2020) identifies that racism, as a word, is primarily absent in conversation with non-Indigenous work colleagues. It is often off limits or never to be used. This means that institutional and everyday racism is left untouched, to proliferate. The only talk is to be happy talk and that which focuses on the pleasing elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. This is backed up by the common mantra that there are no racists here, there is no racism here, or it’s not racism. For many white people, the fear of being accused of racism is far worse than the act of racism itself (Ahmed, 2012; Bargallie, 2020). Bargallie (2020) argues that there is almost always the denial of racism or, furthermore, the denial of racism by non-Indigenous work colleagues; if any conversation on racism is raised, people deny there is any racism at work. This conflicts with the everyday reality of Indigenous

people within the workplace, including within workplaces such as universities. In this way, Bargallie (2020) argues “racism is both absent and present”. She explains this as the “absent presence of racism” in the workplace (Bargallie, 2020). Lentin has coined the term “not racism” to describe this phenomenon of denial and argues that this is “a form of racist violence” (Lentin, 2018). We did not want to perpetuate that form of racism within this course intended for participants to learn about cultural competence.

Feedback and Evaluation of the Course

The overall feedback and evaluation revealed that we achieved what we set out to do with the course and helped us shape the following courses offered as part of the trial. While acknowledging that some of the discussions were difficult, people generally enjoyed the opportunity for open interaction and discussion. It was identified that there was a need to encourage all participants to take greater responsibility for their own learning and to do “more work” through group work, conversation, critical thinking and analysis.

What was also realised through part of the feedback was that we needed to clearly identify to participants, in advance of the course and in some detail, what they would be learning and the type of learning journey they would be taking. While this is not normally part of other types of professional development programs, participants felt this would help dispel myths around what they thought cultural competence was or was not. We also needed to clearly explain what Indigenous cultural competence was in relation to the content of our course; this could be supported through extra reading materials to be made available online to participants. The feedback also enabled us to purchase copies of the book *Indigenous Australia for Dummies* (Behrendt, 2010), one for each participant. The cost of each book could easily be built into the cost of the course and enable us to give participants a resource to take home for follow-up reference. This would be important, given that the course had been reduced to one day. The book was gratefully received by participants in the courses that followed, which confirmed our decision that had been based on the evaluation of the first course was correct.

An unexpected comment in the feedback received from a few participants was that the course should not be so “difficult”, which surprised us. On discussion with others in the university, we were advised that we should try to find a way to “dumb down” our content. This shocked us. We are sure that people in the university who deliver training where they refer to occupational health and safety legislation, discrimination legislation or fire drill procedures are not asked to “dumb down” their content, or not cover core elements of the legislation, policy and so forth when offering that training to staff. We did wonder whether the “dumb down” comments were intended to help us find a means to protect participants against discussions on white privilege, and in that way, undermine the reality of race and racism. We argue that requests to “dumb down” our content are a form of the ongoing colonising violence in Australia and to

do this would be defaulting to white understandings and comfortabilities (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Other comments on the evaluation forms conflicted with one another. For example, while most people wrote that the facilitators were “passionate”, “articulate”, demonstrated “knowledge” and dealt with issues, a couple wrote that the facilitators were “aggressive” or “angry”. We know that it is common for Aboriginal women and women of colour to be positioned as “aggressive” and “angry”, rather than “assertive”, “passionate” and “articulate” which is the way non-Indigenous women and men are positioned. Lorde (1984), Moreton-Robinson (2000), bell hooks (2000) and Fredericks (2010) have all written about the trope of the angry black woman, the angry woman of colour and the angry Indigenous woman, particularly when challenging racism. Being “intelligent”, “assertive” or “articulate” are traits reserved for white people.

At the end of the delivery of the first course, we, as the facilitators, needed to debrief. Our colleagues who documented the course also articulated the need to undertake debriefing. Emotions expressed by participants during the course had impacted upon all of us. During the course, numerous racist comments and statements of denials were made by participants. The lead facilitator had felt the full brunt of the comments and statements, and, at one point, before our team met to debrief, she described how her body felt like she was having a stroke. She was not. Instead, she was feeling emotionally and physically battered. We supported one to another to work through the issues and to also feel safe again. Our experiences speak to the myth of “safe space” in race dialogue between white and Indigenous people which, we argue, is a veiled form of violence. This “safe space” is a white privilege where white people can “avoid publicly looking racist”. For Indigenous facilitators or participants, the “*violence is already there*” (Leonard & Porter, 2010, p. 139).

The evaluation of the first course enabled us to produce a strong “Indigenous cultural competence” course that was subsequently offered three more times as part of a broader trial. We received overwhelmingly positive reviews, positive comments via emails, and some participants posted positive messages via their social media accounts (Stokes, 2015). Many people who had completed the face-to-face training said they wished that it had been longer than one day, despite the fact that they needed one day from their workplaces to undertake the course. Others who had not done the training had indicated that it should be one day or shorter.

Despite the very positive feedback, the course did not get off the ground for broad roll-out within the university. Instead, the senior management of the university decided to invest monies into the development of a “diversity” course from within the School of Education and the Arts, which would cover a range of “equity” groups. For example, the course would cover Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, sexual diversity, gender, disability and people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, all within a five- to six-hour course; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander component would equal approximately “one hour”. Reducing the Indigenous cultural competence course content down to one hour and lumping it into a “diversity” course validate the concerns we had raised earlier about the institutional commitment to Indigenous cultural competence. This “diversity” course does not

evoke commitment to action and is largely non-performative. As Ahmed (2012, p. 53) argues, “the institutional commitment for the term ‘diversity’ is a sign of the lack of commitment to change and might even allow organisations such as universities to conceal the operation of system inequalities”. The cultural competence course developed within the OIE based on evidence and then trialled and fine-tuned based on feedback has not got off the ground.

Conclusion

In developing a cultural competence course, we drew on over 40 years of practice by others and what Australian universities, and universities in the international context, have offered by way of cross-cultural training, cross-cultural awareness training, cultural competence training and cultural safety training (Sherwood & Edwards, 2006; Westwood & Westwood, 2010; Yang, 2000). We engaged with the literature and talked with people at a number of universities. We spoke to people within the National Centre for Cultural Competence at The University of Sydney. We additionally drew on our own experiences. We have both been engaged in delivering cultural awareness training in government departments and in organisations. We knew that the course needed to be designed to be more than the basic cultural awareness training courses offered in a government department in the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s (Fredericks, 2006). On reviewing the literature and based on our experiences, it is obvious that those basic courses do little to bring about change either within the workplace or in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Moreover, discussions around race, racism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues have moved on since the 1990s, and cultural competence courses need to reflect this.

We set out to develop a course that was based on the evidence and aligned with the directions being undertaken in the sector and by universities of Australia, to encourage participants to critically engage with content that would cover history, race, colonisation and the future. Along with this, we sought to foster critical thinking, self-reflection and discussions about cultural identities, privilege, attitudes, prejudices and propensity to stereotype, challenge racism and promote anti-racism practices. The course also needed to align with and mirror the goals and aspirations outlined within CQU’s RAP. The course we developed achieved all of this. It enabled varying degrees of personal transformation (Kelly, 2013; Young, 1999), and we hope the participants are able to utilise their transformed level of understanding to make shifts within their practices within the university. The course we developed is not going to be offered in the university and we find this disappointing, since we know that it had the capacity to develop and build tangible skills and strategies for staff. We additionally know that it would have greatly contributed to making shifts in the organisation for the future, and it is this reality that offers the greater disappointment. One of the greatest learnings for us in this process has been that despite the 40-plus years of evidence gathered, monies being made available for course development, consultation with staff and a trial being offered, this work was still derailed by the managerial processes and opinions

of non-Indigenous people who think they know what is best within the cultural competence arena. This demonstrates that Indigenous cultural competence training is still largely driven by non-Indigenous people through white racial frames that inform how and what they seek to know about Indigenous people. As Indigenous educators in Australian universities, we advocate for an “intellectual solidarity” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) in developing and delivering Indigenous cultural competency training fuelled by a desire to do away with racism. This requires seeing race and racism at the centre of political policy, process and practice rather than in the margins and where the struggle against the racial subordination of Indigenous Australian peoples becomes the higher good.

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Bronwyn Fredericks is a Professor and the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) at The University of Queensland. Bronwyn holds qualifications in health and education and worked in tertiary education, government, and community controlled organisations and is additionally a Commissioner with the Queensland Productivity Commission (QPC).

Debbie Bargallie is a postdoctoral Senior Research Fellow with the Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University. Debbie holds a Doctor of Philosophy from Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests are in Indigenous Knowledges, decolonising methodologies, race, racism, critical race theory, and racial literacy.

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