I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which you are reading this article and pay my respects to all Aboriginal Elders.

Education has not always been linked to safety and positive experiences for many Aboriginal learners. Their Aboriginal identity has been ignored and for many, linked to abuse and ridicule. Understanding the ongoing impacts of colonisation in modern day classrooms is an integral part of developing authentic relationships that improve training and assessment outcomes for Indigenous learners in Vocational Education and Training (VET). Cultural safety in the classroom is the key to creating an environment where Aboriginal learners can feel empowered to reach their full potential.

'You will feel uncomfortable for a very long time' was the initial message I received from my first cultural awareness training. This was delivered in 2003 by an Indian man who had worked with the Aboriginal community for a number of years. Those words still ring true in my head at times, when I have a classroom full of Aboriginal students who may have mixed feelings about their educational journey with another 'gubba' teacher.

I prefer to use the term ‘facilitator’ instead of teacher, trainer or assessor. The role of a facilitator is to empower people to develop skills and knowledge, perform tasks, take action, and be recognised and acknowledged. A facilitator encourages students to share ideas, opinions, resources and provides an opportunity for students to value their own expertise and skills (Prendiville, 2008). Calling myself a facilitator helps to alleviate perceived power struggles of authority and power inequalities. As a facilitator, I can help to create a culturally safe learning environment for Aboriginal learners.

Aboriginal learners’ experiences of education

If you consider Australia’s shameful history of the treatment of Aboriginal people, a history of arbitrary and incredibly cruel punishment handed out by people in positions of authority and power, it is easy to understand why Aboriginal people can be dubious of mainstream traditional educational institutions. I can recall a time when I naively asked a group of mature learners about a positive experience they could recall from their schooling. Not one hand went up. When I asked them about a negative experience of school, I was horrified to hear stories of belittling comments, physical abuse, nonexclusive practice and low expectations from their teachers. These stories were from suburban schools in and around Melbourne.

I knew then that I would never ask that question again. For this reason, I deliver VET courses in community and not in mainstream classrooms. Delivering classes in Aboriginal safe environments, such as Aboriginal controlled organisations, adds another layer of cultural safety for students. Aboriginal art mounted on the walls, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait flags in full view, and Aboriginal staff, indicates to students that their Aboriginal identity and culture will not be disputed or ignored, but instead regarded with respect.

The effects of racism are well and truly alive in the Aboriginal community. This is evidenced in over representation in the justice system, homelessness sector, suicide statistics and the seventeen-year gap in life expectancy. It is imperative that facilitators receive Aboriginal cultural awareness training to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence when working with Aboriginal students.

Although our classroom may be brimming with Aboriginal students who are resilient, intelligent, insightful, and with a strong desire to achieve so the lives of their families and communities can improve, the impacts of colonisation are still present. Those impacts are through transgenerational trauma which have manifested in feelings of shame, and are acted out in the form of lateral violence. Transgenerational or intergenerational trauma for Aboriginal people is five generations long and is linked to historical events such as massacres, starvation, removal of families to reserves or...
missions and the removal of children, now known as the Stolen Generations.

**Transgenerational trauma and lateral violence**

Duran Duran (1995) suggests that historical trauma is entrenched in the cultural memory of people and passed on the same way culture is usually passed on, and therefore normalised. Transgenerational trauma results in a cycle of family violence, poor mental health, substance misuse and family breakdown. This entire article could be dedicated to the topic of transgenerational trauma because it is so complex, unresolved and continues to have a devastating effect on the Aboriginal community, and therefore Aboriginal students.

The word ‘shame’ is commonly used in the Aboriginal community. It is used when an Aboriginal person is singled out, even for reasons that appear positive to non-Aboriginal people. Singling out an Aboriginal person, even for praise, in the classroom can result in deep feelings of shame that can result in students not participating, or at worst leaving the course. Shame can be debilitating for Aboriginal students. Empathy is the cure for shame. This means facilitators must allow the time to build rapport and develop an authentic relationship with the learner so they can become comfortable with praise and positive feedback as the course progresses. Overcoming shame means empowering Aboriginal people to share and celebrate their culture. This can be done by nurturing a three-way respect between facilitator, the other students and the individual Aboriginal student.

Lateral violence is a product of colonisation that results in a spectrum of behaviours that includes bullying, shaming, social exclusion, family conflict, gossiping and other negative behaviours. It occurs when the oppressed and powerless turn in on the oppressed and powerless. In Aboriginal communities, this means they turn in on themselves as they are the most oppressed and powerless, there is nowhere further down the scale to turn to. The mental anguish caused by lateral violence is passed on through the generations and is yet another example of unresolved trauma.

Lateral violence comes from being told you are worthless and being treated as being worthless, over a long period of time. Lateral violence is an attempt to feel dominant in a powerless situation. This only perpetuates a cycle of oppression and can be expressed as the ‘crab in the bucket’ analogy of pulling each other down. It is important that facilitators are aware that students who are stepping up and attempting to change their situation might be experiencing lateral violence from their families, kinship and community.

**Breaking the cycle of shame**

Many Aboriginal people do not talk themselves up for fear of ridicule, so the facilitator will require patience and time to establish the student’s many strengths. The relationship between the facilitator and the student is crucial in overcoming the possibility of the ostracising and shaming they may receive as a result of accessing an education. This may include being seen as thinking themselves better than others in the community, or even becoming ‘whitewashed’.

Strategies that can assist Aboriginal students to feel culturally safe in the classroom include:

- working from a strength-based approach
- providing holistic support that considers all aspects of the student’s life
- developing an authentic relationship that is disconnected from a perceived power imbalance.

This all takes time; the time many facilitators struggle to find amid competing demands. It takes the backing of managers and CEOs to allow facilitators to work outside the box. To nurture relationships with not only the Aboriginal student, but their families and their communities.

Current education systems want results in a timely fashion. This does not work for many Aboriginal students who have difficulties building trust and juggling so many transgenerational and psychological challenges. However, if one is allowed the time, the results are truly magnificent. Continued on page 15 ...
assist adult education practitioners who work with learners who face multiple barriers to learning and employment.

The resource includes case studies based on the characteristics of learners at each stage within the SoC model and then goes on to show how this can be applied to the A-Frame ILP. There are references for further reading for those interested in learning more about Motivational Interviewing as a skill. We should all aim to ensure initial conversations and assessments have at their heart the needs of learners.


**References**


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There are so many talented and inspiring Aboriginal people who will shine if given the time and respect they so deserve. As facilitators of learning we should celebrate successes, recognise resilience and support empowerment.

**References**


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