

Benefits with Peta Rake and Freja Carmichael

(T: Tracey K: Katelyn F: Freja P: Peta)

Voiceover

Welcome to Indigenising Curriculum in Practice with Professor Tracey Bunda and Associate Professor Katelyn Barney.

T: Hi everyone, I'm Tracey Bunda and welcome to our podcast series, Indigenising Curriculum in Practice. I'm a Ngugi Wakka Wakka woman and the Professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Queensland.

I'd like to start the podcast by acknowledging Country and the various countries from where you, our listeners, are located, and pay my respects to Elders, past and present. I acknowledge the ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to society at local, national, and international levels.

You may very well ask what is the connection between acknowledging Country and Indigenising curriculum? It's important for us to think about Indigenous knowledge systems that have helped inform practice on country. And that's exactly where universities are located, they are located on Aboriginal country. And the knowledge that we bring to our students about country will enable those students to have a more meaningful relationship with this country.

I'm joined by my colleague and cohost Associate Professor Katelyn Barney.

K: Hi everybody. I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we're recording and also where you're listening from and pay my respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong connections to country. I also want to acknowledge that where we're recording has always been a place of teaching and learning. I'm a non-Indigenous woman living and working in Meanjin. In this series, Tracey and I are interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics about how they're Indigenising curriculum at the University of Queensland.

T: Together, we are going to ask questions to unravel the why, the how, and the when of Indigenising curriculum.

K: Our theme for this episode is based on the principle of benefits and our guests today are Peta Rake and Freja Carmichael from the UQ Art Museum.

T: Welcome and thank you. Would you like to introduce yourselves in whatever way you're comfortable? Freja?

F: I'd like to start by acknowledging Country, paying my respects to the Traditional Owners. And I'd, yeah, also like to acknowledge where I come from. I'm a Ngugi woman belonging to the Quandamooka People. It's nice to be sitting beside Aunty Tracey here. I guess my way of introducing myself is I wear many hats, but I'm very proud to be working with UQ Art Museum as an Adjunct Research Curator since September last year, and I also am a PhD candidate in the School of Communication and the Arts. And yeah,

it's lovely to be bouncing between both those hats and, yeah, bringing those ideas between each other, too, which we'll talk more about.

T: Thanks Freja.

P: Thank you, thank you both for having me. And pretty delighted to be sitting here with my colleague Freja as well. To introduce myself, my name's Peta Rake and I'm the Director and Senior Curator at UQ Art Museum. I am a non-Indigenous woman and I was born on Turrbal and Jagera Country and I'd also like to acknowledge the sovereign custodians of the land that we're on today. My family lives on Bundjalung Country.

Before I started this role, and I've been at UQ for about six years now which is kind of crazy to see when I saw that, but I was living in Canada on Treaty 7 territory for over a decade and I've had such incredible experiences being able to learn with amazing Indigenous Elders from across Canada as well. So really happy to be here today, thanks for inviting.

T: You talked about your roles at the university, could you just talk a little bit about your relationship? Freja, I'll start with you.

F: I guess I was fortunate enough to be connected with Peta in 2019 when you returned back to Australia and we first collaborated on the Unlearning Programme, Weaving the Way. And so I was a guest curator at UQ Art Museum and that project involved researching the University of Queensland Art Museum collection, and that was the first time being able to have sort of that in-depth access and being given that opportunity to look really deeply, but it was also an honour to be given a space to have freedom and to think about what story I wanted to tell as well. And I think that was also one of the first experiences for me as a curator to be given, granted access to a collection and a space and to think about what's a really important story to be sharing.

And I also, yeah, really benefitted from the mentorship and leadership of working with Peta and the UQ Art Museum team and I guess that's how that professional relationship grew, but also really deep friendship, too. And I guess that's sometimes what happens when you start collaborating with people as well, there's both the values you share in work, other values, too, in life.

T: That's what we try and do as Aboriginal people, to have that professional relationship as well as that personal relationship and work it together. Peta from your point of view?

P: It's been, yeah, I suppose seven years since, almost seven years since Weaving the Way. But behind my kind of thinking when I first started that project, Unlearning, was how might I step back in terms of my role as a curator and relationships were so important to how I work and we were introduced actually by a really close colleague of ours, Léuli Eshrāghi, who's now Indigenous Curator at Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal, but is also another research curator at the museum and we were originally I suppose connected. And I think that that relationship building piece is so important to how we've worked together.

And I know you used the word mentoring, but I'd also like to say I learnt so much from Freja through Weaving the Way, particularly as a curator that hadn't, that had spent

most of her career in North America, it was really important for me to learn from you in that context. For example, even the way that we were using certain naming conventions within the collection, Freja started to think about how we were using the style guides, and that work I suppose from six or seven years ago is something that we are still working on because that's an immense project for collection. And just to say, that's just one of many things that I learnt from you during that time that we've I think continued in terms of our conversations and how we work with one another.

F: We're always learning, too. And, yeah, mentoring's not just like younger generation learning from the older, but how by collaborating together, how that is a form of mentorship too, to learn from each other's ideas, and I think that's just something that I find is embedded in UQ Art Museum's practices, are very collaborative, team environment.

K: That's really great to hear about your relationship and how you learn from one another. And Freja, I remember taking students in one of my courses to the Weaving the Way exhibition and you did a great guest lecture for me as well, so a number of years ago now.

One of the Indigenising Curriculum design principle is benefits. So Peta, I wondered if you could talk about what you see as the benefits, you know for students and for staff, in working in the Art Museum space and what are the benefits that students can learn from art about working with Indigenous people and Indigenising the curriculum?

P: I suppose I can answer that in many ways, but the way we approach working with staff and students is through an interdisciplinary lens. So we work with courses across the university to think with course convenors about how to embed principles around Indigenous arts into their courses. So it's as diverse as working with obviously arts, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Unit, but also medicine, dentistry, political science, et cetera.

So we kind of tailor educational work and I suppose course content for each course. And I have to say, while it does take a few backflips, particularly for some of the courses, it is really important because I think particularly younger students get a lot of value out of understanding Indigenous practice through artwork. And we also do that by centring Indigenous voices, it's not always the non-Indigenous curators talking. We invite a lot of artists to speak directly about their work so people are hearing direct from artists about how they're articulating their concerns of country, identity, and relationship.

So for me, it is an area that we, it's such a vital area of how we work and the benefits are I suppose both internal I think for students about how they might kind of move on and kind of continue into the world, but also the fact that they're being able to meet with Aboriginal artists and global First Nations artists is, I think, an incredible opportunity. I definitely didn't get that in my education when I was studying. So I think for us, it's... I'll answer it kind of pretty concisely just about from an interdisciplinary lens, I think it's huge actually.

T: I think that's a really great segue into my question about what you see is the responsibility of the Art Museum to Indigenous communities. Like if we think about the campus, the campus couldn't be more removed from, you know, the location of

Indigenous communities. But the Art Museum has really engaged with Indigenous artists and Indigenous exhibitions.

F: Thinking about the role of the Art Museum and the responsibilities to our communities, there is quite a big responsibility because it is a space of where culture is presented, it's where stories are told, but it's also, as Peta was saying, that interdisciplinary engagement as well, so it's a space for multiple voices. And so the role of the Art Museum is how do we support all of these multiple ways and how do multiple voices be shared as well, and how also are we responsive to the present day as well, like being able to connect with the issues that are affecting our communities.

That's why it's so important to have Indigenous presence in the museums as well, so by having people involved in all facets as well, not just in curating, in programming, in public programmes, artist representation, too. It's having these multiple perspectives that are coming together. And those, yeah, responsibilities extend to thinking more specifically, too, about art collections, like as Peta mentioned as well around the documentation and representation, to even the responsibility of how we write about artist's work as well, and that's something in, more specifically, as my role as an Indigenous curator.

It's so important to work alongside our artists and communities. By saying that, it's about sharing that authorship as well, it's about really working sensitively and respectfully. And, yeah, there is a big responsibility, but it's so important.

P: Absolutely. In terms of what Freja was saying, it's a immense responsibility. So much of museum practice and the history of museums, as well as curatorial work, is so grounded in colonial concepts of collecting, which we don't need to go into now. But I think what is interesting I suppose with curatorial work, particularly contemporary curatorial practice, is that we're able to really think about the museum as a critical space, whether depending on I suppose which camp artists are falling in, decolonising or Indigenising the museum as a space really through all of the backend ways in which we work.

So I think, for me, it's about thinking about how we're staffing and structuring the museum, what reporting looks like in terms of creating safe structures for all of our artists to work in, as well as our Indigenous staff as well. So it's only a benefit in terms of the importance of the presence. And I do, as we're moving forward and as we're kind of looking into the future of the Art Museum but also arts practice, working together and really breaking down authorship, particularly from a museum and curatorial side is the way that we are working, and that's not the norm across the arts, I will say. We do work in a unique model here because we are led and have different conversations with community.

T: If you were going to provide one key piece of advice to anyone else who's going to work in the Indigenising curriculum space, what would that advice be?

F: My advice would be the multiplicity. Yeah, thinking about, yeah, that multiple perspectives, multiple voices. I think it's important to not keep telling the same story. A part of Indigenising curriculum is, whilst like one experience could relate to what is happening here, how that might be very different across the country as well. So how can we, yeah, think about how we include multiple voices in the future, too.

T: I think that's really important, Freja. Sometimes what happens in our relationships is that non-Indigenous people will always only go to the one Indigenous person to get that voice, as if that voice speaks for the whole Aboriginal nation, and we know that that's not true. Peta, what would be one key piece of advice?

P: I think, I suppose from a non-Indigenous perspective, I would say it's about listening and listening deeply and also doing your own research first before asking questions and really kind of thinking about your position, particularly around I suppose the core pillars of Indigenising curriculum that you've laid out, Tracey. Really thinking about I suppose your personal positioning around those, so thinking about how you approach respect, for example, and relationships among all of the other, you know like truth and reciprocity. So, for me, it's kind of listening and how you kind of do that in each of those areas.

K: So the UQ Art Museum has a number of internship opportunities for students and there's been some Indigenous students who have had those opportunities. Could you talk about what the benefits of those internships are?

F: The benefits there was the recent appointment of the Blacklash Curatorial Intern Programme with UQ Art Museum. And so that was supported by Blacklash to provide industry professional development for an undergraduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student at UQ. And so the intern has been working across all facets of the museum, really being enabled to develop their programme as well, so really finding their area of interest. And I've been working really closely with Braelyn Chase-Rolfe to help her develop what her area is, and so that's been particularly focusing on writing as well.

So it's been a lovely exchange of, yeah, being able to support, but also impart my own practical experiences, too. Like I've really benefited from mentoring opportunities over the past decade and I think that's really instilled in me as well the importance of giving back and helping the next generation of emerging curators, arts workers. Yeah, I think about that succession as well, what I've learned, how I can pass that on as well.

And so I think, yeah, these opportunities, they have so much benefit as well because it's, again, supporting Indigenous presence in the UQ Art Museum, but on a different aspect through a student who's currently enrolled in UQ and, yeah, coming into the university and bringing those experiences as well, like what are they learning right now, what are the conversations that are happening, and also what are they finding really pressing to be talking about, too.

P: And with the Blacklash internship, we've seen, it was off the back of several interns that we had at UQ Art Museum that were so amazing, they were excelling. So one of them was Adam Ford, another one was Darby Jones. And what we saw, among others, but I suppose what we saw is that they've gone onto such incredible positions in the industry because UQ Art Museum was really offering a testing ground I suppose for them to figure out particularly which areas of museum or arts/cultural work that they might want to go into afterwards as well as I suppose a space to kind of experiment as well. So yeah, we worked closely with Blacklash to think about how to frame that internship.

- T: At a really base level, it's just so nice to walk into a space and there are Indigenous people there, as an Indigenous person myself. And you don't realise that, that you sort of sigh relief that you don't have to navigate a non-Indigenous space all the time. So thank you very much for coming today and helping us with this podcast, it's been great. Katelyn.
- K: Thanks so much Freja and Peta for joining us. It's great to talk about the role of art as a medium to include Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous voices, and also those internships opportunities for students are really great to hear about as well. And thanks for joining us for another episode of Indigenising Curriculum in Practice.

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