

Letters from Mungo: A Dialogue on Decolonisation to Improve Academic Engagement with Aboriginal Students

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Abstract

A challenge for all universities in Australia is how to engage, and importantly, retain Aboriginal students. It can be tempting to think that addressing that challenge primarily concerns services, support and content. However, that response views the point of adaptation in the student. Academics also need to adapt and evolve if their relationship with Aboriginal students is to be improved and be embracing of how an alternative world view may enhance their own and hence their teaching. Much has been written on what constitutes decolonisation in education and how to achieve it, often involving an Indigenous voice. Less has been written on the personal transition required to realise decolonised practice so that what is experienced by all is inclusive and meaningful. This concerns what the colonisers need to do to bring about change in themselves. To explore this issue, a shared self-reflective dialogue is presented between an academic and a government scientist who have each been transformed by their experience of working with Aboriginal people. Over the structured discussion, a number of threshold concepts come to light that need to be embraced as fundamental elements on the journey to decolonisation. The work is purposefully self-reflective so that others can share the direct feedback we have had from working closely with Aboriginal people in Australia.

Background

Intellectual adaptation, particularly for academics brought up on the primacy of western philosophy, can be challenging, even within their own disciplinary traditions. And there are few useful guides on how to approach it. In this paper, rather than focusing on answers, we explore understanding and the evolution of understanding as it has occurred for the authors. The authors come from quite different backgrounds, and work in quite different contexts, but related fields. Tim is an Executive Dean of Science, all of his scientific training has been as a biophysicist which he has related to several different fields of research such as biomaterials and more recently cultural heritage science. In the latter field of research the interface between analysis and the concepts of worth, value, damage and change in cultural heritage led to a re-evaluation of the way that people with different perspectives take different values from the same object. Tim moved from a pure scientific role to a more administrative approach over the last 10 years, in this he developed an interest in social justice and believes that education brings about generational change. Mal works for a state government agency, undertaking cultural and scientific research into how Aboriginal values can be better integrated into landscape management. His work evolved out of Aboriginal archaeology, and transitioned into conservation planning for biodiversity. Mid-career, Mal began exploring how conservation planning (as practiced for biodiversity) could be applied to Aboriginal cultural heritage. To explore this issue, Mal has worked hard to immerse himself

in Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal communities and their landscapes to understand what conservation planning can mean from an Aboriginal perspective, and how to apply it in the business of the government department he works for.

We explore here the current state of the authors' understandings of Aboriginal philosophies and cultures and their influence on our respective approaches to engaging with Aboriginal students. This occurred through a dialogue that unfolded over a two-year period. The dialogue took place intermittently, and often around a camp fire out in the bush with Aboriginal people at Lake Mungo. Mungo is a special place that leaves its mark on people (Goggin et al., 2017), and it certainly has left its mark on us. Between visits to Mungo we corresponded by email, and the debate and reflection that emerged reflected our understanding that emerged through our respective career experiences leading to our meeting at Mungo.

The dialogue that follows is organised around several key questions that we kept coming back to in our correspondence, and reflect the issues we've found we had to address to decolonise in our respective careers. We therefore used these to structure the paper. For each question, we each wrote responses separately and independently, drawing on our correspondence. We focused on these questions because for us they point to fundamental concepts about how the colonisers decolonise in the context of the colonised. Our reference point therefore was the feedback we have had working with Aboriginal people. So, this is very much an opinion piece, both in terms of how we selected the questions, and how we responded to them. Nonetheless, as this is largely an unexplored area of decolonisation literature, we feel this is an appropriate place to begin this dialogue and promote more rigorous research on it.

How have you made yourself available to participate in Aboriginal cultures in order to gain a better understanding of them?

Tim

I need to go back to my love of languages. I've always loved the power of language and the fact that there are words in languages that don't translate well because they capture a cultural identity or attitude so well. For example, words like *chutzpah* in Yiddish means sheer gall, but not quite. In Scotland and then in Wales, I learned the indigenous languages of Scots Gaelic and Cymraeg (Welsh), respectively, and that gave me a better connection with the land. At CSU in 2013, I was told about the course in Wiradjuri language and nation building; so I signed up. I have heard that people expected me to drop the course early on claiming that I was too busy, but I gladly stayed with it to graduate in 2015. The experience however gave me so much more than language. It widened out, enabling me to begin engaging with Aboriginal people about a variety of issues. So the language was the hook. I may not have been so committed if it had been first nation building, but I'm a bit of a governance geek so those parts interested me as well. These activities connected me with a community that I may never have met. Yet, I've got a long way to go in gaining an understanding Aboriginal cultures. I've found in my career that turning up is an important aspect to evidence commitment or even just interest. Getting involved with and supporting the National Indigenous Science Education Programme has been another avenue where I have begun to distinguish some of the mainstream education of science and Indigenous thinking. This has also been supported by the work with the Office of Environmental Heritage. Once again here, the interface between scientific methodology and Aboriginal culture practice are brought together.

Mal

In one sense, it has been unavoidable for me to experience Aboriginal culture because it is part of what I do for work. But that doesn't also mean I've experienced Aboriginal culture on terms determined by Aboriginal people – it is terms determined by my work, which is dominated by non-Aboriginal people, policy and practice. The real difference is when you are invited to join Aboriginal people in what *they* do, in a space of *their* choosing, in a context *they* create, on terms *they* determine. That is a privilege, one that doesn't come from asking. It just emerges organically, but occurs because of the way you make yourself available for those opportunities – which is something I've tried to focus on.

The first time I recall this occurring was with the northern NSW Aboriginal heritage team, who were getting together for their end-of-year team meeting. I had been doing bits and pieces of work with them over a couple of years, and just getting out with them for fieldwork, offering advice on archaeology and mapping, and just enjoying getting out on Country with them. I was asked to drop by if I got the chance, so I convinced my boss and headed up there for a night on the way through to another meeting.

I remember arriving around lunchtime. They were outside eating with other local Aboriginal community members. So I was the only whitefella there with 20 or so Aboriginal people. When I arrived, one of them came up and said: “hey, Mal, come stand over here. There is a sacred tree we want to show you.” I had spent enough time with them to tell it was a joke, but I went along with it anyway. They said stand right under the tree there and see what you feel ... and I’m thinking ... yeah c’mon ... what’s the joke? ... Then a snake head appears beside my face, and I realise it’s a python in the tree. I jumped a mile. Everyone was in hysterics ... me included. Apart from the obvious joke, it was a bit of a test to see how I’d play along, to see if I could fit in. This was important, because it was a context which wasn’t work, wasn’t organised ... it was just being with the mob. It meant they weren’t treating me as someone who was white, or an archaeologist, or a worker for government ... I was just Mal, dropping in, and being the butt of some fun, as everyone else had been when they arrived.

What I remember most from that experience were the different conversations had because the veil of cultural self-consciousness was lifted. These conversations were different to the ones I’d seen in meetings, workshops, or organised fieldwork. The conversations covered racism, archaeology, science, whitefellas. They were frank and emotional. They were topics never broached in formal settings unless asked to directly. They were had because there wasn’t the veil of them feeling the presence of non-Aboriginal people who might feel offended or want to debate. It wasn’t that I had become Aboriginal and accepted as such, it was more that it no longer mattered who or what I was. I’d proven myself as someone who could be trusted, was someone who accepted their world view and issues, and who wasn’t afraid or intimidated by just being with them. And indeed, was just there to be with them, no other agenda.

I have since done this kind of thing a lot. It has come to be among the most enjoyable parts of my job. I never ‘organise’ any of it – it just seems to happen. But I think until you are prepared to go there, to make yourself available like that, you never really get the honest, frank and un-filtered view and experience of Aboriginal culture. You can’t ask for it, or expect it, or organise it. It feels as though it just emerges when you give it the chance to, when you approach relationships in a genuine manner; and when you show a willingness to open your mind to seeing the world through their eyes.

For me, this is what you must do if you really want to understand Aboriginal cultures.

What are your most memorable experiences of working with Aboriginal people/cultures?

Mal

My most memorable experiences have always been those when I’ve been out on Country, just being there; round a fire, walking Country, listening to the wind, amazing at odd coincidences and laughing till your sides hurt.

I wrote about this kind of experience in a paper about story-telling (Ridges 2012). It focuses on a time I caught up with some Aboriginal men I knew well. They regularly go bush to talk as men, experience the landscape, connect with the old people, and practice their culture. There was a sense of being part of culture. Regardless of what you believe, the moment takes you on a ride, and it’s a joy to be there in that moment. It is hard to describe, but you know it when you’re there. Any time when I’ve found myself in this situation, it is what I have most enjoyed about being with Aboriginal people and their cultures.

My most recent experience of it was catching up with a friend in the Macquarie marshes. Officially, I was there to explain the floodplain management plan we'd been working on. But the afternoon was a chance to go look at a few cultural sites. We got to the junction of the Barwon and Macquarie, which is the location of a key part of the creation story for the marshes. To be there with the person who taught me the creation story, to have spent the day with her in that landscape, to have travelled the whole creation story over those couple of days, to be aware of the significance of those places, to be there by invitation and valued to be there, and to just soak it all up was just deeply fulfilling. It is during these moments that I've learned most about what connection to Country really means, and yet, it had nothing to do with what anyone specifically said or did.

Tim

The graduation for the Wiradjuri course was one of the proudest moments of my academic career. Being in the first cohort made you feel like a pioneer, and I guess I still do. The graduation ceremony meant that I was given the Indigenous sash (not sure of the word). I really didn't know about wearing it in case it offended my fellow students, the vast majority of whom were Aboriginal people. I will always remember the warmth they showed and their acceptance of me by their insistence that I should wear the sash.

My first trip to Mungo was also a revelatory experience for the connection with country. I guess that my interest in the Wiradjuri course led to the invitation to be on Country and see the fire sites from thousands of years of occupation. To see the footsteps of Mungo people was a privilege and one that that took a long time to sink in. The best experiences are sometimes those that grow with time.

Finally, the most painful experience was alone in my kitchen in Wagga Wagga on a Saturday afternoon. I was studying the online CSU Indigenous Cultural Competency Programme and watching the module about the freedom bus of Charlie Perkins, etc. There was one part that described about discrimination in the 1970s with the denial of Aboriginal people to bathe in the swimming pools at Walgett (although later reading I realised that it was mostly at Moree). This simply upset and disgusted me. This was transformational for me in understanding the discrimination that some of the Aboriginal people I know have gone through, and how utterly repugnant that white people – who are probably still alive – were enforcing this and thinking discrimination was appropriate. I understand the use of discrimination in schooling, use of language, etc. to break a people. It happened in Scotland and Wales, but such a discrimination about access to a swimming pool is pathetic.

What were some of the personal intellectual challenges you faced as a result of engaging with Aboriginal people?

Tim

I am a scientist. I've been trained as a scientist. Thinking in a reductionist and analytical way is what I know. However, I believe to be a successful scientist you need to have a creative streak that seems to be missing in some scientists. I am also an academic and have always worked in academia. Working with Aboriginal people therefore can be an interesting counterpoint to the world of academic politics, science and formal Western logical reasoning.

Examples come to mind: "Nothing about us without us" was a concept introduced to me early on in my journey in working with Aboriginal people. The involvement of the people themselves was essential to the process. This is potentially at odds with the hands-off, independent approach required in Western Science. The interface of Western ethical protocols with Indigenous ethics is emergent and also challenging.

Furthermore, the concept of Indigenous Knowledge as information that is contextualised is challenging to me in the way that scientific method should allow reproducibility. Independence of observer or experimenter is important to finding a universal truth. The concept of a knowledge being something *worth* knowing is a value judgement that depends on the person who gives value to the information, for

example, if it can be exploited. This points to the fundamental concept of a scientific framework that is used to judge the voracity of any knowledge but is not seen as a framework itself that can be judged. Such structure is only challenged by a paradigm shift where the framework cannot account for an observation and has to be modified. Most people however cannot produce evidence to challenge or change the framework (when did you last test the speed of light) and there is a significant inertia of vested interest in the framework that can be amassed to maintain the hegemony.

As a scientist, academic and Dean, I find that people - including Aboriginal people - have decided how I think and what my values are before I open my mouth. It has often been a challenge to demonstrate that I am open minded and not necessarily always wedded to scientific methods where I believe that contextualisation and phenomenological framework has relevance. Rigour of the scientific process does not need to be based only on the scientific concept of reproducibility and reductionism, thriving i.e. doing better than surviving shows that technological adaption and interaction with the land for sustainable living exhibit a rigour shown by Aboriginal people.

Mal

The biggest intellectual challenge has not been with Aboriginal people or their cultures. It has been the difficulty people have with seeing a different perspective and accepting alternatives other than their own.

An example is working with the agency of the non-human. Personally, I'm comfortable with it ... whether that means you embrace that everything has spirit, or not, doesn't matter to me. But if you are willing to work with the agency of the non-human, it changes how you view your place in world, how you relate to what is around you, to how you behave. It is not about belief, but rather a frame of thinking that *anyone* can engage with. An open mind is all you need to see it from that perspective. But for many, it challenges a key assumption of post-enlightenment philosophy that is hard to break or let go of. That is what I have found the greatest challenge, closed minds.

Closed minds come in a variety of forms. Scientists tend to have trouble engaging with the non-human because it goes against some of their basic beliefs. Many Aboriginal people struggle with non-Aboriginal people who themselves are struggling to accept the difficulties they face and the legacy they carry from a crap colonial history. Everyone in this space, myself included, struggles with the closed mind at different times. However, it is those who refuse to admit it or work on opening it or lack the humility to explore alternatives, that I find most difficult.

I resist any notion of 'this is right', and 'that is wrong'. There are just innumerable perspectives. I love learning about them and engaging with them. For me, that is where real wisdom resides. But that's just me. I understand it's different for other people. I just find it frustrating the work involved in helping people open their minds at times. It is a challenge that I frequently confront facilitating the interface between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal issues in landscape management.

How has your thinking changed as a result of working through such challenges?

Tim

My approach to these challenges has matured as I have engaged or been engaged. My thinking about the role of self and as an observer has changed. I have also realised that through working with Indigenous people and with other marginalised groups that a collection of views and respectful discussion allowing each to express their own way is far more powerful than that of an individual.

I've also had to become more of an advocate in my actions, and this relies on a different way of thinking. What may be regarded as harmless fun in terms of activities that may engage people into an Aboriginal way of life may be both patronising and compartmentalising. That may do more damage than give any meaningful level of engagement. This mainly falls into two categories. Firstly, there is the use of

Aboriginal hunting artefacts or astronomy as examples of cleverness that can be whimsically worked into a Western paradigm – which will always be able to demonstrate the West’s superiority. Secondly, especially for children, there is the weak engagement through non-intellectual activities - such as ‘colouring in’ pictures of boomerangs - that are tokenistic. To this end, I’ve had to advise colleagues that some activities that I would have tolerated a couple of years ago, or even encouraged, I would now see as counterproductive in producing a dialogue that aims to be respectful.

Finally, I’ve become much better at accepting that most people are not scientists, and most don’t go down the rabbit hole of Western reductionist reasoning in their everyday life. The human brain is more than a flesh-made computer. Therefore the scientific outcomes need also to be considered in a framework of consciousness.

Mal

The biggest change has been to see my role as a facilitator and embrace it. As a scientist, it is tempting to think that the solution is out there waiting for *me* to find it. However, being trained as an archaeologist means I’m equal part humanist. That means for me the solution lies in people, not just me. So, I’ve come to learn that I don’t have to be Aboriginal to sympathise with and understand where they are coming from. Or for that matter to explain my understanding of it to those who don’t understand or carry a narrow point of view. While I can’t REPRESENT their perspective, I can help them articulate it. I’ll always be learning, but I can engage with them as someone who does make the effort to understand. I can even help them to reach a deeper understanding of their own understanding, through which we both learn. Equally, I can engage with scientists, the public and policy makers on Aboriginal issues. This is what I routinely do at work. Again, I don’t REPRESENT Aboriginal points of view, but I can articulate those, especially in the sphere of helping to decolonise thinking so that more productive discussion and understanding can be achieved. The ‘science’ of how we do this better is what really interests me.

I have heard a surprising number of academics state: “Oh, but I’m not Aboriginal. So I can’t teach or research that stuff.” That’s just rubbish in my view. Most teach outside their expertise, and research is MEANT to be exploring outside your own understanding. Otherwise it doesn’t represent real innovation. The real issue I think is an arrogance that assumes that nothing is useful in Aboriginal philosophy and world view compared to the embedded western ontology.

Thankfully researchers like Viveiros de Castro (2004) are really engaging with it, and even arguing that it can improve the western ontology and get through some of the ruts it has got itself into. The literature on two-eyed seeing is also in this vein. It is making a genuine effort to embrace the value of two perspectives rather than identifying which one is better (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012; McKeon 2012). That is the future I believe, and working out how to become more effective in that space is what I have learnt most.

The change, which I think is crucial to the role of educators, is the ability to divorce oneself from any particular perspective (but not ignoring that you are embedded in one regardless). We need to be offering to students, research, and policy makers a more articulated understanding of different points of view. This means being less wedded to what the predetermined learning outcome might be and respecting participatory process. Then finding value in enabling more focused discussion and better scoping of alternative possibilities.

Personally, this is something that I believe is under-taught and greatly under-valued. Shawn Wilson (2008) talks about this as an aspect of respect for the way that Indigenous people communicate. It is often culturally inappropriate to assume the knowledge or perspective of others. For me, it comes from seeing myself as a generalist rather than a specialist¹. I am able to bring a range of ideas and tools rather than being wedded to any one.

¹ <http://theconversation.com/expert-culture-has-killed-the-innovator-in-workplaces-77681>

How has the evolution of your thinking in response to engaging with Aboriginal people allowed you to re-evaluate your own assumptions and preconceptions?

Tim

The nature of self and the relativism of different frameworks being used to judge knowledges was not something I had considered until recently. However, we seem to accept or allow the high priests of science² (if history is anything to go by) to control the framework. It is only changed when the challenge of an outsider provides an alternate view with evidence that shifts the paradigm that had happily been lived in. The reframing work described by Boyer (1990) begun to address the concept of teacher as learner to reinvigorate the teaching performance.

I'm struggling with the notion of the way in which Indigenous knowledge is being categorised by the hegemony that controls science. It either dismisses Indigenous knowledge as being a quasi-science, or it fawns toward a view of romantic primitivism, where the actions of an Indigenous group are frozen in time. They are used as a museum piece describing the way THEY hunted with jolly clever boomerangs, or had the beginnings of land management, etc. It worries me that some people then consider the concept of Indigenous science as a separate discipline, although the term Indigenous Science or Ethnic science may sound superficially attractive, imagine that it was called 'Black peoples' Science' as opposed to that espoused by the White elite.

Mal

I grew up with the notion of non-human agency and spirituality (my parents were into the new-age thing). So, I've never found that to be conceptually challenging.

The real change in how I evaluate my own thinking is the notion that there is any sense of a 'right' answer to anything. Science, in common parlance, is this search for 'truth'. I'm not sure how much I buy into that rhetoric anymore. The reality that I adhere to now is that the 'truth' is both incredibly complicated (think quantum theory), and it looks radically different depending on how you look at it (think phenomenology). I increasingly think that the drive for 'truth' is more political than practical. It is driven by issues of power and influence – issues that ironically have driven social research for decades, but it is so little engaged with in science.

So, as a result, I really focus on questioning assumptions and trying to identify preconceptions, rather than just going with what is accepted. I'm sure my colleagues sometimes think this makes me a philosophical navel-gazer at times ... They are probably right! But I am also proud of the fact that we had a researcher from another branch in Science Division come to our team meeting once. When he was asked: "What do you think makes us different?". His answer was he believed that we GENUINELY innovate in what we do. He said many of the other science teams just apply established science to different problems and call it innovation. He thought that we really think outside the box as part of what we do. I hadn't thought about my behaviour like that, but when it was pointed out, I was pretty chuffed by that comment. On reflection, I'd argue that it comes from our willingness to see questioning our preconceptions as a strength rather than a weakness. Through my adjunct status at UNE, I supervise several HDR students. This is something I put them all through ... hopefully for the betterment of their projects. But interestingly, it often teaches me a thing or two also. That's a key indicator for me to see that they are getting on top of what their thesis is actually about, by pointing out MY preconceptions! Then we succeed in teaching each other something ... Now THAT'S exciting.

² who are usually white middle classes and male (as I am)

Do you think you have moved towards decolonising your mind?

Tim

At an individual level, the main trait of colonial thinking that I have embedded in me is that of considering what is useful/exploitable and therefore will give me more power. This has been difficult to confront since it is intellectually ingrained and also part of the academic process. However, I'm now recognising that not everything needs to be framed in such a way. I recently gave a talk at ANU about altruism as a long game. I was really questioning whether altruism (which is of course pleasurable) is actually manipulative in a long timescale and actually helps me to achieve my long term and usually westernised goals. The fact that this article is being written for an academic journal speaks to a containment of knowledge and thinking that is away from many of the people that it should involve. This criticism of course could be said for any aspect of academia where the thinkers are kept away and codified into obscurity from those it should 'serve'.

At an institutional level, the challenge of walking in two worlds for all of us remains fraught. The structure of symbolism and reward in Academia does not in my observation align well with Aboriginal people. However, that is not for me to judge. Indigenous people for now still have to fit within the Academic paradigm if they wish to get any traction. Therefore their acknowledgment requires them to fit into the paradigm that is essentially medieval in origin. The acceptance of Indigenous philosophy into academic is too often regarded as an historical artefact rather than a progressive contemporary way of thinking that could be useful to us all – but there I go again with value judgements.

Mal

I had an interesting talk about this with my PhD supervisor recently (we still catch up for coffee despite it being almost 15 years since I graduated). He was describing his wife's experience of participating in an Aboriginal cultural awareness course. Having worked with him and Aboriginal people on many archaeological projects, she was familiar with Aboriginal cultural issues. However, she wasn't aware of using the word 'Aboriginal' versus 'Indigenous' and what was the 'right' context to use either one.

Even though I am not an Aboriginal cultural awareness trainer, I rejected this suggestion quite strongly. I did so because my experience has been that to focus on the 'right' word is to not engage with the Aboriginal people and context you find yourself in. I often hear people say things like: "Oh ... but I don't want to cause offence." That is a total cop-out in my view because they are too afraid to just engage. Making the effort to engage is, ironically, the most respectful approach in my view.

But you have to be willing to listen. Hear the language of the context you are in. Be prepared to get it wrong a little bit so you can be corrected. Actively contribute. That, to me, is real respect. So, what I try to do is not 'assume' there is a right or wrong context in which to use the words Aboriginal or Indigenous. Rather, I listen to the language being used by the Aboriginal people I'm with. I then engage in that conversation, maybe get the language a bit wrong, but I let them correct me. I try to respect their language at that time and place. Sometimes that means 'Aboriginal', sometimes 'Murri', sometimes 'blackfellas'. The respect I think comes from engaging.

When you've engaged ... and you are talking freely without issues arising ... or those awkward pauses occurring ... is when (I believe) you have decolonised. I used to think being decolonised was when the folks you were with acknowledge that THEY think you've decolonised. The problem with that is that they may be going through a process of decolonisation also. So now I think decolonisation is not determined by yourself (certainly! – but you still see that!) or by others. It is actually when it is no longer an issue ... hanging there as the elephant in the room. You have decolonised when decolonisation is no longer an issue. But here's the rub. It means you may be decolonised in some contexts and not others, even with the same people but not others. Your level of decolonisation is not once realised and finished, but can come and go. The real point for me is that decolonisation is a continual process of engagement and humility, not a state that is acquired.

I have a colleague who was very forthright and political ... quite an activist for Aboriginal rights... she was very liberal with speaking her mind! She intimidates and polarises people ... even Aboriginal people! But we have always gotten on great. Not because I do the whitefella, suck-up (do-gooder) thing. She sees straight through that. It is because I engage (respectfully) in what she has issues about, and we can talk about it openly. I think she would say she would respect me for that. If I think about it, she represents the most culturally critical person I know and the one who, on the surface, would seem the most challenging to guide my effort to decolonise. But we have always gotten on really well because of our honesty and debate. That has meant the decolonisation thing has never been an issue. I tend to think that this is where I feel the most decolonised. I feel comfortable in that space with her to debate and draw attention to things, and that honesty is reciprocal. To me, that is what decolonisation is. It is not a state you reach, but rather, it is a level of engagement where assumptions and presumptions can be openly questioned and explored to the benefit of all those involved in a continual cycle of growth and reflection.

In conclusion (if that's possible)

Looking back, writing about the conversations we've had, a legitimate question can be asked as to whether this discussion, in an article, has been a culturally appropriate way to explore our understanding of how Aboriginal culture can co-exist with science without the need for nullifying one or the other. In such a style of conversation, we took turns listening to each other's story. Most important were our thoughts as white Anglo Saxon men that developed from the stories of the Aboriginal people we've spent time with, rather than debating who or what is right. The focus here was therefore a deliberate focus on the need to reconcile and decolonise our minds to become part of the respectful and more meaningful way to engage with Aboriginal people. We firmly believe that we as researchers need to expand our perspective to enable meaningful interaction with Aboriginal students. Wilson (2008) describes how this lack of debate about who is right is common to Indigenous philosophies. There is acceptance in those world views that all knowledge resides in the creator, because no single person can ever be across all of it, so we must respect that we all have very different learning journeys. Only through sharing do we collectively grow.

Much of what we have therefore reflected on around the fire at Mungo was how we collectively expand our own knowledge by exploring together. We see how each other's story relates to and enhances our own knowledge. The story continues, we've found a way of working together. Now we are working with communities as advocates in our respective roles. That helps us all work our way through a fraught space. This journey could benefit us all whatever the starting point of view. That openness, and perhaps the science of how we support Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to realise it, can not only benefit the way in which academic and professional staff of higher education can become involved with meaningful engagement of all students to take many views into account. The emphasis of the discussion here is that the academic themselves as learners (Boyer 1990) must realise the change needed before they can embark on realising that in others.

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