New millennium pedagogies — recipe for success

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A specialised Bachelor degree for Indigenous health workers has been offered from Charles Sturt University’s Dubbo campus since 1997. A recent cross-sectorial evaluation of the program has indicated the course is enjoying degrees of success not seen in many mainstream courses much less other Indigenous-specific tertiary level programs.

The overall retention rate from enrolment to graduation is approximately 83% across five years of offering. The graduate employment rate is 93%, with 40% gaining promotions as a direct result of participation in this course. Immediately after graduating 32% undertook further studies.

The innovative pedagogy underpinning the program aligns with current principles of adult education including learning needs assessments, safety, sound relationships, sequencing, praxis, role delineation and development, teamwork, engagement and accountability. Adherence to these principles and adapting them to the socio-politico-cultural contexts that surround Indigenous education is challenging what some interpret as acceptable “politically correct” practice, however, this of itself has been part of the success of the program.

Writing curriculum, designing, developing and delivering specifically Indigenous education at tertiary level requires the predominantly non-Indigenous academic staff to master dual roles of educator and cross-cultural diplomat. From conception, this has ensured a unique vantage, necessitating the rise of new pedagogical combinations: compulsory short duration residential schools, emphasis on double point subjects, a growing repertoire of innovative assessment methodologies and embedding literacy and academic skill acquisition and development in subject content. However, the most important strategic developments have been in the area of managing the politico-cultural environments.

Despite external criticisms, the strategies of utilising evidenced-based history, Indigenous guest teachers and the voluminous knowledge the students bring to the learning is not only working, but is providing unparalleled success. This educational combination challenges students to explore “culture” from a broader platform than a purely Indigenous and often narrow perspective. It includes examining colonial culture and health cultures among others.

Student evaluations repeatedly confirm that the course provides not only knowledge, but in-depth understanding of the contexts: social, political and cultural, that instigate and maintain Indigenous health status today. This enables graduates to examine, analyse, interpret and participate in health service delivery in increasingly more meaningful and powerful ways. The success of this course has spawned two postgraduate courses developed with the same educational genre to be offered from Charles Sturt University in 2003.