Yarning and Learning: Co-Creating Inclusive Social Work Simulations Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge

Bindi Bennett
Federation University
bindi.bennett@federation.edu.au

Indigenization Statement

This article is informed by Indigenous knowledges, experiences, and community relationships across Australia, with particular attention to the lands, cultures, and epistemologies of Yolŋu Peoples of Arnhem Land and Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay Peoples of northern New South Wales and southern Queensland**.**

The presenter, Professor Bindi Bennett, is a Kamilaroi/ Gamilaraay woman, born into, shaped by, and accountable to Kamilaroi communities and ways of knowing, being and doing. Her responsibility to Kamilaroi relationality, kinship, and cultural authority informs the analytical stance and ethical commitments embedded in this work. As a Kamilaroi researcher, she approaches the material with obligations of care, truth-telling, and respect for Country, Elders, kinship structures, and cultural protocols.

In engaging with Yolŋu knowledge systems and communities, Dr. Bennett and all individuals involved in the project she presented recognise Yolŋu Peoples as sovereign knowledge custodians with distinct epistemologies, languages, and governance structures. They acknowledge the unceded sovereignty of these Nations and recognise that research is always situated within relationships to the lands on which it is produced. They also affirm their ethical responsibilities to Indigenous communities, uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, and commit to ensuring that this work contributes to strengthening rather than extracting from Yolŋu, Kamilaroi, and other First Nations Peoples.

The article draws on Yolŋu sources in ways that honour Yolŋu authority, acknowledges the diversity of clan groups, and respects the protocols articulated by Yolŋu Elders, researchers, and community representatives. Where Yolŋu concepts, frameworks, or community examples are included, they are used with care and acknowledgement of their cultural specificity.

Abstract and Presentation Overview

This presentation, *Yarning and Learning: Co-Creating Inclusive Social Work Simulations Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge*, outlines a First Nations–led initiative funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC IN230100002). The project co-designs immersive 2D and 3D simulation modules to prepare social work students for culturally responsive practice, with particular attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Grounded in Indigenous methodologies of Knowing, Doing, Being, and Connecting, the project foregrounds yarning as both method and methodology. This approach elevates relational accountability, cultural authority, and two-way learning while dismantling deficit-based frameworks in social work education. Co-designed simulations emphasise healing-centred engagement, slowness and deep listening, and long-term commitment, positioning communities as leaders in shaping the pedagogy of social work.

The presentation highlighted emancipatory practices where Elders and communities reclaim authority. Through visual storytelling, accessible dissemination, and feedback loops, the simulations create culturally safe spaces for students to learn, unlearn, and practice ethical engagement. This work situates simulation not just as a teaching tool but as a platform for relational transformation, cultural sovereignty, and truth-telling within professional education.

Key Learning Objectives

Historical and Structural Context

- Understand the ongoing impacts of colonisation, including the Stolen Generations, systemic overrepresentation of First Nations Peoples in state systems, and the complicity of social work within colonial frameworks.

- Critically reflect on the burdens historically placed on Aboriginal communities to educate non-Indigenous practitioners and identify how simulation can redistribute this responsibility.

Indigenous Methodologies

- Apply Indigenous paradigms of Knowing, Doing, Being, and Connecting to social work practice and pedagogy.

- Recognise yarning as both a culturally grounded method of knowledge generation and a methodology of engagement that disrupts Western academic dominance.

- Incorporate relational accountability into practice, placing relationships before outcomes and committing to integrity with Elders, knowledge holders, and communities.

Principles of Co-Design

- Honour cultural authority by deferring to community-led decision-making processes and local protocols.

- Support self-determination by ensuring communities define their own needs, solutions, and measures of success.

- Embed transparency, shared ownership, and reciprocal knowledge exchange throughout design and implementation.

- Recognise the need for slowness and deep listening (Dadirri) as essential to culturally safe engagement, resisting institutional pressures for speed.

Healing-Centred and Country-Centred Practice

- Embed healing and resilience within co-design processes, recognising the roles of trauma, grief, and cultural survival.

- Ground learning in Country, acknowledging seasons, languages, and spiritual significance as central to social work practice.

- Ensure cultural responsiveness by affirming the emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs of Aboriginal participants.

Pedagogical Application through Simulation

- Engage with immersive simulations that mirror real-world cultural contexts, allowing students to practice communication, relationship-building, and advocacy.

- Navigate simulations focused on:

  o Historical context and decolonisation

  o Kinship and community dynamics

  o Communication foundations and yarning

  o Culturally responsive engagement and protocols

  o Systemic racism and ethical advocacy

  o Navigating diversity within communities.

- Critically reflect on personal biases, positionality, and responsibilities when entering cross-cultural contexts.

Emancipatory and Relational Outcomes

- Recognise yarning as a tool for reclaiming authority in shaping education, interrupting colonial deficit assumptions, and building shared understanding.

- Value the role of visual storytelling and AI-generated culturally symbolic images in making complex ideas accessible to students and communities.

- Participate in iterative feedback loops where communities can validate, reshape, and influence the evolving theory and practice.

- Envision simulation as part of long-term relational commitments rather than one-off training or consultation.

Future Directions and Broader Impact

- Position social work simulations as tools for relational learning, truth-telling, and sovereignty, not just technical skill-building.

- Extend the benefits of this project beyond academia, ensuring accessible dissemination to communities, services, and broader publics.

- Advocate for educational practices that embed respect, responsibility, and reciprocity as core elements of professional training. This project demonstrates that culturally responsive social work education must be grounded in Indigenous sovereignty, relational accountability, and truth-telling. Simulation offers a transformative platform for learning and unlearning, but only when co-created in genuine partnership with communities. By embracing slowness, reciprocity, and cultural authority, social work educators and students can move towards practice that heals, rather than harms, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.