Challenging and Confronting: The Role of Humanities in Fostering Critical Thinking, Cultural Competency and an Evolution of Worldview in Enabling Education

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Abstract

Humanities discourse forms part of several Australian academic enabling programs, either embedded within the broader curriculum, or as part of a standalone unit. Within Edith Cowan University's UniPrep course, an introductory Humanities unit is offered to students as one of two electives alongside three other core units. The unit introduces students to key concepts within the Humanities, exploring disciplines such as ethics, philosophy, language, history, religion, politics, law, Indigenous studies and fine arts. In addition to offering students an understanding of these disciplines, studying Humanities within the context of an academic enabling program can provide students with several other benefits. Feedback from students enrolled in the UniPrep Humanities unit indicates that students experience an increased level of cultural competency, an evolution of worldview, and an enhanced level of critical thinking upon completion of the unit. Importantly, these areas align with research conducted into broader academic enabling principles. This article will explore these connections to suggest that the inclusion of Humanities within an academic enabling program can enhance students' preparedness for undergraduate study and life beyond university on several levels.

Keywords: Enabling education; Humanities; cultural competency; critical thinking; worldview.

Introduction

Enabling programs are a relatively new and diverse initiative worldwide, and their range has significantly increased in Australia following an extensive review of higher education in 2008 (Bradley et al., 2008). The report called for the urgent need to "turn the rhetoric of lifelong learning into a reality" by adopting a 'well-coordinated, systematic approach to addressing […] complex issues and increasing the numbers gaining qualifications" (Bradley et al., 2008, p. xii). Additionally, while the aim of any academic pathway program is ultimately to recruit new undergraduate students, enabling programs in particular have a duty to challenge an exclusive model of tertiary education. This can be partly achieved by allowing potential students access to life-changing skills and perspectives, irrespective of their socioeconomic background or future pathway. UniPrep at Edith Cowan University (ECU) has operated with this in mind for approximately ten years, evolving from a hands-on course to one that caters specifically for students who "lack standard qualifications for entry", equipping them with "knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to success in their first year of undergraduate studies" (Relf et al., 2017, p. iii). It operates within a group of 34 Australian universities receiving funding for enabling courses (Bookallil & Rolf, 2016), with an aim to meet the national target of 40% of 25-34 year-olds attaining a Bachelor level qualification by 2020 (DEEWR, 2008, p. 12).

ECU's enabling course is structured to mirror the broader undergraduate experience, with students completing four distinctive units within one semester of full-time study (or equivalent). Cohorts are large and often diverse. In 2018 there were a total of 2356 commencing students enrolled in UniPrep, including school leavers (up to 19), youth-age (20-24) and mature-age (25+) students. Successful completion of all four units gives students an indicative ATAR[1] with which they can access the majority of undergraduate pathways at ECU. A chief aim of enabling programs should be to "provide transformative life and educational experiences for students by challenging their beliefs about education and knowledge" (Relf et al., 2017, p. 17). This suggests a more holistic intent than just enabling scholarly discourse and career readiness. It is especially pertinent when considering the goals of enabling, remembering that not all students will continue on to higher education. If this is to be their only university experience, its effects need to be both enlightening and tangible.

A Well-Rounded Education

In 2019, Kisida and Bowen (para. 2) suggested that:

> A critical challenge for arts education has been a lack of empirical evidence that demonstrates its educational value …
> despite national [US] surveys showing an overwhelming majority of the public agrees that the arts are a necessary part of
> a well-rounded education.

As Ronald Barnett pointed out in 2013, "the idea of the university has closed in ideologically, spatially and ethically" (p. 2). This means that universities increasingly become preoccupied with their own interests, primarily economic (with a resulting casualty often being humanities programs), and the challenge is to reimagine the context of the university 'in the real world'. A humanities education can bridge the gap between theory and "real-world use" (Visser Falke, 2007, np) but, with emphasis (and funding) increasingly geared toward science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in the twenty-first century, championing a rich, rewarding humanities education – and convincing students of its longer-term benefit – can feel challenging to educators across the tertiary sector. This is especially true in an era and culture where, until recently, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were "expected to have an interest in occupational qualifications, but not in the cultivation of the mind or the character traditionally associated with a liberal arts degree" (Laming, 2012, p. 61). Practical and financial concerns may encourage enrolment on more vocational courses, but, as Laming asserts, a degree can be a way of entering a "new world" regardless of social capital.

Therefore, it is encouraging that several enabling courses across Australia have chosen to include humanities. This is, we argue, not only as an academic alternative to science, but also for its ability to provide varying perspectives, critical engagement, rational inquiry and creative thought. The UniPrep Humanities unit elicits the following learning outcomes through an introductory exploration of ethics, epistemology, Indigenous cultures, history, politics, religion, art, language, and law. Underpinning all the areas covered is the primary question: *What does it mean to be human*?

- Applying reliable and scholarly sources to support ideas.
- Analyse texts to retrieve key ideas.
- Debate different perspectives on a range of topics.
- Synthesise ideas to form a single argument.

These academic outcomes assist HASS students who have not encountered these concepts at school and provides STEM students with the basics. Crucially, they also link into broader, and more far-reaching, critical thinking skills that aim to benefit students whatever their future degree or career trajectory. In an era of climate change, "fake news", and now a global pandemic, it could be argued that the world increasingly needs both the momentary joys and the nuanced, careful thinking that this discipline offers its students. UniPrep was established with a curriculum enabling model based on "cohesion, coherence and connectedness" with a targeted attention on students at educational risk (Relf et al., 2017, p. 3). This research by Relf et al. found higher levels of student agreement with the use of deep learning strategies as opposed to "surface"; namely, those pedagogical tactics enabling "cognitive functions of analysis, evaluation and synthesis for in-depth acquisition of knowledge".

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[1] ATAR: the ranking that reports a student's position relative to the Year 12 school leaving age population in Western Australia.

This is conducive to transformation of knowledge, a key area we focus on throughout this article with regard not only to study in the humanities, but as a broader social and cultural benefit beyond university.

Given such potential for wide-ranging impact, it is surprising that very little published research exists to underscore the benefit of a specific humanities program for enabling programs. An exception is Hodson and Zemits' (2016) exploration of redeveloping a pre-tertiary humanities unit, reviewed in terms of best pedagogical practice. Our article provides a different perspective that incorporates student feedback as a primary marker of success, considering the value of the discipline beyond an undergraduate degree.

Like many institutions, ECU conducts student surveys that provide staff with both qualitative and quantitative feedback on the content and delivery within each unit. Surveys are disseminated via email to all students within the final weeks of each semester and followed up by global communications encouraging them to participate as a mechanism to assist the university in maintaining best practice. An average response rate for these surveys is 30-40%, however due to the size of the cohort within UniPrep, this percentage is often closer to 20%.

Questions are consistent across most ECU units and speak to the organisation, delivery, materials and assessment of a unit, with students placing their results on a scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A space is also provided for students to offer anonymous and broad feedback on the best aspects of the unit, and those in need of improvement. Comments are uncensored, but students are guided on appropriate ways to provide feedback ahead of initiating the survey. Approximately 70% of students who complete a survey provide comments alongside their rating. This article analysed in excess of 600 student comments across both on-campus and online modes of study for the unit from a period between 2016 to 2019. Responses were grouped into "themes" based on their content, with emphasis given to feedback that offered more than positive responses such as "interesting lectures", or negative responses such as "more guidance on assessments". Although not prompted or questioned on the topic specifically, notions of transformative experiences feature prominently in feedback on the Humanities elective. These experiences range from an adoption of critical thinking skills whereby students find themselves questioning the validity and credibility of the information surrounding them, to large and telling shifts in relation to increased levels of cultural awareness and an evolution of existing worldviews. These three themes emerge from an analysis of student feedback, and so are showcased in light of student response. This article will explore the approaches within the UniPrep Humanities unit that may be responsible for eliciting these outcomes and, more broadly, it will consider the relationship they share with the broader notion of transformation within academic enabling literature.

Critical Thinking

"Critical Thinking" is a term used frequently in all areas of university study and is touted as an essential skill if a student wishes to reach tertiary competency. Unlike our other focal areas of "worldview" or "cultural competency", it is put forward as a specific learning goal of the unit. However, the path to achieving critical thought is not straightforward. As Bailin et al. (2010) described it, "Those who become critical thinkers acquire such intellectual resources as background knowledge, operational knowledge of appropriate standards, knowledge of key concepts, possession of effective heuristics, and of certain vital habits of mind." Critical thinking processes, therefore, are best taught in conjunction with a broader curriculum, and this is our approach in UniPrep Humanities. Weekly discipline-focused topics constantly link back to questions of justified belief, the validity of sources and the power of informed debate. Nevertheless, we have a relatively short time to instil these complex ideas, and much of the groundwork is done within the first 2-3 weeks of the unit. "Critical thinking" is posited as *thinking creatively and critically*, solving problems in an imaginative way, *thinking outside the box*, *developing social justice by fostering critical reflection* and *developing a better understanding of the human condition*. These are all lofty ambitions, and we do not expect swift mastery of any of them. Rather, we approach the concept in a structured way through the first assignment, a reading comprehension test. As a tool to develop "critical reading skills", this teaches students the importance of taking time with a text, questioning its contents, and not jumping to conclusions in order to complete the task quickly. In addition, placing the topic of Philosophy (with a focus on Ethics) in the second week of the unit ensures that the majority of students will at least have an introduction to the importance of informed, open debate on topics that affect them. As Paul and Elder (2009) sensitively outlined, teaching critical thinking without ethics can lead to "sophistic rather than fair-minded critical thinking" (p. 36). As a result, students understand how to apply intellectual skills that "enable them to get what they want without being bothered with how their behaviour might affect others" (p. 36). In a unit emphasising the question of *what it means to be human*, ethics seems the obvious portal through which to begin an investigation into critical thought.

Student feedback typically links critical thought with the ability to evaluate "everyday" considerations as well as scholarly ones. This demonstrates the efficacy of using popular ethical conflicts to enable greater self-examination:

> [I benefited from] the diversity, encouragement and facilitation of open-minded critical thinking. Students were frequently challenged to take a step back from their own views and consider aspects they do not normally. (Semester 1, 2018)

> The group discussions were both fun and confronting at times, the refugee unit in particular was interesting to watch as several people made fun of it at the start and seemed to have changed their opinion by the end of the day. (Semester 1, 2018)

The group discussions mentioned here often begin with conversations in small groups where students navigate a topical conflict or dilemma (For example: The ethical ramifications of euthanasia; Links between accent and prejudice; Attitudes toward Australian convict ancestry; Australian asylum seeker policy), before growing organically into broader classroom debate where, perhaps unexpectedly, students find themselves considering (or discovering) perspectives that were previously overlooked, often reframing their opinions as a result of this. The following survey responses speak to these outcomes:

> This unit enhanced my ability to think critically and provided a variety of topics from within humanities. (Semester 1, 2017)

> I loved being challenged on my views and hearing others opinions also. (Semester 1, 2017)

> Provided methods and materials to critically think about and evaluate everyday life contexts. (Semester 2, 2019)

> I felt like Humanities was a unit about people and relationships, not really about academics. I liked the fact that in class we spent more time discussing and evaluating situations, rather than sitting there and working. (Semester 1, 2017)

This final comment is noteworthy as it speaks to the accessibility of these discussions and their favourable grounding in "situations", "people" and "relationships", rather than what students may consider as academic 'work'. Without doubt, these classroom discussions are designed to be engaging, fluid and accessible to students, but they also mirror a more structured approach to academic literacy whereby students are required to consider the information they encounter during their academic journey within a rigid and critical framework. Like an opinion in a classroom debate, students learn that each article, book or website they encounter needs to be considered in relation to its authorship, publication, perspective, politics, and within the context of the surrounding literature. This can be a particular challenge for younger students who often find it difficult to assess the relevance, credibility and validity of information they locate online (Metzger et al., 2007). Suddenly, what may have presented like a straightforward discussion or a compelling article, swiftly becomes problematic when considered within these critical frameworks. However, far from a mechanism to confuse or disorientate students, many of which are already considered at educational risk due to factors such as diminished academic confidence and low English language proficiency (Klinger & Tranter, 2009), this realisation often appears to engage and empower students in their broader educational journey. Positive responses such as the following speak to the willingness of students to critically engage with topics and materials by the conclusion of the unit:

> The engagement of the unit and also the information that was being presented encouraged further thinking. (Semester 2, 2018)

> The content in general, learning about so many different aspects of society and being encouraged to question what we may have initially believed about a certain topic. (Semester 1, 2017)

> This unit increased my knowledge on how to identify genuine articles and how to read and think critically. (Semester 2, 2018)

Critical thinking is present in much of the literature exploring effective enabling pedagogy. Baker and Irwin's (2016) audit of national enabling programs ranks critical thinking behind only writing and reading on a hierarchy of the components making up academic literacy in such programs. Wilson (2016) argues that developing critical thinking skills, specifically the ability to read critically, is a crucial step for students within any university preparation course. Crawford's (2014) study of students within the UPP course at The University of Tasmania (UTAS) features the revelatory experiences of students who adopt critical thinking skills within this specific enabling program. Much of the literature on critical thinking within an academic enabling context can find a basis in Robert Cantwell's (2004) exploration of the goals of academic enabling providers. Cantwell offers the following description of the transition that takes place within students as they begin to adopt critical thinking:

> The students are beginning to think differently about the nature of knowledge and learning and about themselves as learners - they have begun to cross over to a higher order way of thinking, one which implies a developing lens that allows them to subsequently see the 'why' and the 'when' as well as the 'how' and the 'what'. (p. 357)

Cantwell (2004) argues that this is an essential step in the process to what he terms 'getting it', whereby students reach "a critical level of competence that we deem appropriate to undertake undergraduate level study" (p. 357). This emphasis on the epistemological again becomes visible in relation to how students engage with the "knowledge" (readings, lecture materials, opinions of peers) they encounter in any particular unit. In undergraduate study, students need to be able to consider all materials "in a form that is more generalised and more abstract than the form in which it was presented, but which nonetheless remains tied to the context from which it was constructed" (p. 364), a challenge that may present as complex and intimidating to many students, hence the benefit of initiating the process within the accessible and supportive framework of an academic enabling program.

If it is acknowledged that critical thinking is indeed an essential skill for students to learn in preparation for their future studies, the question turns to how best to teach or foster this skill within an academic enabling context. We suggest that a grounding in ethics, even if brief, can encourage the willingness to consider the multiple perspectives that underpin effective critical thinking. In addition, that the application of critical thinking within "real world" scenarios can provide a strong foundation for a similar process related to the more academic contexts awaiting students in undergraduate settings.

The topic of disciplinary knowledge is also worthy of discussion in this context. An assessment of the various national enabling courses indicates that "skills and disciplinary knowledge jostle for primary position" in many of these programs (Baker & Irwin, 2016). The UniPrep program operates similarly, with units (Learning Skills, Academic Writing) that maintain a strong focus on academic skill development, and others (Science, Humanities) where disciplinary knowledge is prominent and assessable. Thus, the inclusion of Humanities within an academic enabling context may appear like a mechanism to teach discipline knowledge in core Humanities areas such as ethics, language, politics and art, providing students with the opportunity to "brush up" in these areas ahead of their related undergraduate studies (Baker & Irwin, 2016). However, student surveys of the UniPrep Humanities unit would suggest that the real benefit of discipline-led curriculum may be its ability to elicit the development of capstone skills such as critical thinking that are often prioritised more directly in other units and topics. In this sense, rather than jostling for preference, academic skills can be born out of disciplinary engagement in a way that may have proved challenging otherwise.

Evolution of Worldview

In addition to the development of essential critical thinking skills, the UniPrep Humanities elective foregrounds various other academic skills such as information literacy, reading comprehension, research and debate - all of which are designed to assist students in their transition to undergraduate level study. Of note to this discussion however are the less tangible social, cultural and personal developments that can appear to occur alongside these learnings. When viewed in totality, UniPrep Humanities leads to an evolution of their worldview.

A worldview can be defined as a lens through which an individual views and understands the world and their experiences within it (Ivey et al., 1997). The simplicity of this definition perhaps sells short the complicated web of interrelated cognitive and experiential processes associated with worldview. Chen et al. (2016) suggest that worldview can begin to develop within children in just the second grade, but also that the process doesn't necessarily cease at the conclusion of school, rather has the potential to continue on right throughout their lives. Consequently, UniPrep Humanities aims to expand or challenge student worldview and allow them to develop one that that admits diversity. In contextualising the work of Chen et al. (2016) and others within the framework of belief systems, Irwin suggests that initial worldviews are unlikely to be formed out of a critical process, and many people may not even be "fully aware of and conversant with his or her self-constructed worldview" (2017, p. 8). Students in UniPrep Humanities are tasked with addressing both of these notions. Not only are they are asked to make their worldview explicit, but they are also provided with content and exercises that provide information and perspectives that regularly challenge their worldview. For many students this marks an unexpected process, but one which can trigger a defining shift in worldview at a pivotal juncture in their educational journey. Such impact meant that this particular focus probably elicited the most explicit feedback, in which students suggested that their worldview was broadened via engagement with other perspectives (lenses), either in the form of a fellow student's perspective, or 'new' curriculum:

> The controversial subjects spark conversations which then lead to understanding each other better and gaining a new perspective. (Semester 1, 2019)

> These lessons were engaging and made me look at the world from a different perspective than what I normally do. (Semester 1, 2018)

> I really enjoyed learning about the different perspectives people have on just about everything. (Semester 1, 2018)

> Extending my perspective on many issues through information not readily available in general public forums. (Semester 1, 2019)

For other students, the evolution of their worldview appeared to go further than this to a point where their existing lens was not simply broadened, rather challenged and sometimes altered:

> It changed the way I think about the world around me. (Semester 1, 2019)

> It challenges your perspectives on topics that are not normally explored. (Semester 1, 2018)

> Challenging ideas I thought I had a clear understanding about. (Semester 1, 2019)

> The chance to challenge my thinking and world views and think about other perspectives and opinions from other students. (Semester 1, 2018)

It should be noted here that not all students agree with or adopt the various theories and perspectives offered within the unit. On several occasions, these perspectives are challenged by students who, upon engagement with unit materials and discussions, retain or reaffirm their original belief systems. Topics of note in these scenarios include abortion, immigration and religion. That aside, the prevalence of commentary about worldviews on student surveys, be it positive or negative, gives a clear indication that the UniPrep Humanities unit is eliciting something further than academic skills or literacy.

Of course, the development of social awareness is nothing new to the humanities. A 2018 study by Deloitte Access Economics into the value of humanities education revealed that "a humanities degree equips graduates with the tools to better understand their society, its institutions, and the behaviours and motivations of others" (p. 27). Links are also established between a humanities education and an increase in levels of tolerance, as well as civic and political engagement (p. 32). The sheer scope of the humanities (the Deloitte study mentions over twenty disciplines), is no doubt connected to these outcomes, but also raises the question of whether each individual discipline can foster these outcomes. In relation to a discipline such as History, an area given a strong focus within the UniPrep Humanities elective, the Deloitte study highlights the connections between knowledge of the past and the "importance of tolerance and cultural understanding" (p. 31). Bate (2011) communicates something similar in *The Public Value of the Humanities* in suggesting that humanities-based research reminds us that current events have historical precedents. This sentiment is reiterated by UniPrep Humanities students with positives offered such as "Learning about the roots and history of the things happening around us" (Semester 1, 2017). Bate (2011) relates this to the graduate outcomes of students in English Literature programs, in which the historical and factual is replaced by an emphasis on fiction. However, he does suggest that these courses still produce socially engaged and active citizens (p. 73). For Bate (2011), the research, reading and critical thinking embedded within an English Literature degree results in citizens "equipped to engage in the debates about values and social choices that should be part of a healthy democratic society" (p. 74). The UniPrep Humanities elective doesn't include a specific focus on English Literature, however, does cover related disciplines such as Fine Art and Film.

When considering these humanities graduate outcomes alongside research into enabling pathways such as UniPrep, several parallels become apparent. Crawford (2014) and Lomax-Smith et al. (2011) suggest that enabling programs provide, or should aim to provide, more than just academic preparation or skill-based outcomes. Cantwell (2004) elaborates upon this in stating that "development is not just about quantitative change (knowing more) - there is more fundamentally a qualitative change in the way in which world views are represented (knowing differently)" (p. 359). The topic of worldview is also addressed by Willans and Seary (2007) who discuss the STEPS program at CQUniversity as a catalyst for perspective transformation, whereby students are encouraged "to challenge and change their worldviews" (p. 442). Similarly, in a study of enabling

students within the UTAS University Preparation Program (UPP), Crawford (2014) found that, in addition to development in traditional areas such as academic skills and confidence, an increased level of intercultural understanding could be part of this qualitative change:

> For these interviewees, experiencing rich diversity in the on-campus classes in UPP has had a profound impact. These students, some for the first time in their lives, engaged in intercultural communication; have become friends with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own; have become interested in cultures and religions other than their own; and have reported learning patience, tolerance, and understanding. Finally, some admit changing their ideas and attitudes. (p. 25)

This type of outcome aligns with Ibraham's (1985) definition of worldview as a mechanism to help us understand another's experiences and culture. Crawford attributes much of these developments to the diversity of the UPP cohort and the on-campus interactions fostered by the course for students at UTAS. Without doubt, these classroom and campus dynamics are also present and fostered within the UniPrep program, however this article suggests that evolution and development in these areas can also result from engagement with humanities-based content and discussion. In relation to this, several of the comments included in this discussion have been taken from students studying in an online capacity whereby interaction with other students is limited to online discussion forums.

The broader notion of transformation is a common theme within literature on academic enabling programs. There are several threads to the transformative effect these programs can have on students: adjustment to the university environment (Crawford, 2014; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011), challenged assumptions of learning abilities (Willans & Seary, 2007), "metacognitive and affective development" (Cantwell, 2004, p. 357), the development of leadership qualities (Crawford, 2014), and a reframing of past educational experiences (Willans & Seary, 2007). Fostering this kind of transformative development within students is considered as an essential aspect of enabling pedagogy. Delivery of content, however relevant to future undergraduate scenarios, without a focus on what Cantwell describes as a "deeper socio-educational sense" (p. 356) is considered a flawed approach as many enabling students require the skills and motivation to contextualise this material in order for it to be of use to them.

Enabling programs set about eliciting transformations in a variety of ways: inclusive classroom practice, peer review, supportive and open learning environments, a focus on reflection and self-efficacy. In this article we suggest that an additional avenue may exist in relation to the engagement with content from the humanities discipline that actively challenges existing worldviews. To state this more explicitly: *Why is it important that students articulate and challenge their worldview within the context of an enabling program?* Perhaps because it feeds into the broader notion of personal and educational transformation. If students can challenge and alter their existing perspective on a topic such as Australian colonial history or asylum seeker policy by engagement in a unit such as UniPrep Humanities, then perhaps the reframing of their perspective on their own abilities and experiences becomes less of a leap.

Cultural Competency

As discussed previously, a key role of university education is to challenge preconceived notions and worldviews, and the knowledge and application of cultural competency – the ability to effectively communicate and interact with people across cultures – plays a vital role. It is also especially crucial for students in twenty-first century Australia, who live in a vibrant, multicultural society, surrounded by peers of many cultures and faiths. Nevertheless, current government approaches to people seeking asylum, and continuing inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is cause for concern, shrouded by media inaccuracies and government-sanctioned mythology. Consequently, we have chosen to explore themes affecting Australia, but which can be broadly integrated into many global contexts, namely: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and culture, asylum seeking, religious/cultural divide and Islamophobia. Chojenta and Allen (2017) have discussed the importance of integrating similar themes of social equity and justice into The Newstep Program at Newcastle University[2], in large part due to their relatability. This is, they attest, chiefly for the advantage of students from low socio-economic and ESL (English as a Second Language) backgrounds, who may have been more likely to experience "disadvantage, discrimination or injustice" (Chojenta, 2017, p. 1). While this is certainly an element of the approach in UniPrep, we are also conscious of the barriers that exist despite, as Bruiguglio (2006) has found, "having culturally diverse classrooms…[this] will not, by itself, promote student development in this area" (p.1). What is needed, they assert, is "a classroom pedagogy which utilises teaching

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[2] https://www.newcastle.edu.au/study/pathways/newstep

and learning approaches that build on cultural diversity and develop intercultural communication competence in students" (p. 1). This is not rapidly achieved, but presenting a variety of resources from different – even disparate – sources can go some way to enabling cognisance.

Universities in other countries with a colonial history have emphasised the importance of pursuing a decolonised approach, engaging in "strength-based" dialogue that celebrates self-determination. In order to foster empathy, however, an acknowledgement of trauma and its generational implications is crucial – but bringing such emotive discussions into the classroom poses the danger of students feeling unable to express passionate responses in a more detached, scholarly fashion. Nevertheless, it encourages them to apply Australian contexts to a broader cross-cultural understanding of numerous contemporary global traumas and conflicts such as Israel/Palestine, the Afghanistan war, and the Xianjiang internment camps. It also assists in strengthening an acknowledgement of ongoing repercussions and trauma surrounding historical atrocities such as the Holocaust.

The consideration of areas of social discord should also equip students with the skills to develop their own opinions. In UniPrep Humanities this is done primarily by putting forward the lesser-seen side of a contentious issue which, perhaps inevitably in a tertiary arts course, will usually result in a left-leaning bias. Some students were confronted and challenged by guest speakers on the topic of seeking asylum, reporting a lack of balance and a "biased angle trying to sway you more to one side" that was "personally and politically motivated". On the other end of the spectrum, students reported being "ashamed" but "enlightened", appreciative of the opportunity to gain perspective on controversial cultural and social issues "not readily available in general public forums". However, although a thorough understanding of nationalistic attitudes and ways to engage with or counter them is crucial, a key aim of any tertiary education should be to produce students who are "citizens of the world"; who can apply more localised ideas of cultural competency to broader humanistic concerns. But how to best approach such a complex ambition? As previously stated, if a university's key role is epistemological, an obvious place to start this application is via an investigation of knowledge systems and "ways of knowing" beyond the Eurocentric. In UniPrep Humanities, a guest lecture on the theme of cultural competency addresses fundamental differences in how the concept of "knowledge" is understood by Indigenous cultures within Australia. Aboriginal Elder Tex Skuthorpe (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006) defined "knowledge" in Nhunggabarra language as "we don't have a word for it. Our land is our knowledge, we walk in the knowledge, we dwell in [it]…we don't need a word for knowledge, I guess" (p. xv). This concept of knowledge as integral, with no clearly marked theoretical boundaries is outside the lifeworld of most non-Indigenous students; triggering a "mind-blowing" moment, as some remarked after the session. Therefore, as tertiary institutions in Canada have also found, it is imperative for students to understand that Indigenous knowledge is holistic: it "cannot be compartmentalised and cannot be separated from the people … it is a way of life" (Hammersmith, 2007, p.3).

Fostering empathy is a key outcome of the unit and a core aspect within cultural competency; as Pedersen et al. found in 2004, inducing empathy can reduce prejudice. Furthermore, Susan Gair (2013) discovered when assessing social work students' levels of empathy for Aboriginal experiences, that students often feel that "empathy need[s] to be based on a similar experience" (p. 145). Meanwhile Fuentes et al. (2010, citing Weiner, 2000) believe that with students' lived experiences filtered through an 'invisible lens' of White privilege, they are socialized to believe that some people's culture best accounts for their social problems" (p. 358). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students share the enabling pathway, and the hope is that content as described above will help forge a "culturally safe learning space" in which to address preconceived notions and gaps in understanding (Hall & Wilkes, 2015, p.112). Such content more subtly reveals structures of oppression by highlighting the value of hugely different belief systems. Learning how to enact this in a classroom setting continually proves challenging:

> I was in a constant state of disagreement and felt like I was required to bite my tongue which was frustrating, but I suppose
> that was the point in challenging thinking and encouraging coherent rebuttals whilst being respectful of varying opinions.
> (Semester 1, 2019)

Our week focusing on religion prompted similar feedback relating to the ways in which, for the most part, everyone accepted the opinions of their peers, and did not hold prejudice against others. The topic has been approached extremely broadly in previous years, with lectures pinpointing key aspects of all six major world religions. However, increasing societal concerns about Muslims feeling targeted and unsafe prompted the creation of a session that considers "Islam in the contemporary world. This focus proved disconcerting for some, although most students understood the rationale behind it:

> I felt that during our religion discussions, instead of directly focusing on Islam, an exploration of other religions would be good. Understandably however, Islam is a very centric subject in the world now, and so it makes sense. (Semester 1, 2019)

More broadly across the tertiary sector, conflict has existed for some time around the best ways to define the discipline and to deliver a comprehensive program. Taking into account that UniPrep Humanities has only one lecture and tutorials' worth of time to devote to the topic, the possibility of keeping, as Suleiman and Shihadeh (2007) put it, "the classical religio-intellectual disciplines and traditions … at the core of Islamic Studies" is not realistic (p. 311). Suleiman and Shihadeh cite a focus on "the puzzling evolutions of modern Islam" as being of crucial importance, without which there is a lack of balance between "religious science" and "sociological approaches and a study of the modern world" (p. 312).' For a unit focusing on what it means to be human, concentrated study of texts and rituals – though contextual – would not provide the means to consider this topic in a broader, contemporary sense. Students are instead encouraged to procure this information for themselves if they wish to explore further. Nevertheless, some students found the focus on "how white culture has influenced and caused a negative impact upon select groups" (unit evaluation feedback, 2019) to be limiting. For others, such content triggered buried feelings and emotions pertaining to the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US (commonly known as 9/11), an event that precedes the birth of a large percentage of our cohort. Through considering this historical event and its continuing impacts, they were able to create and appreciate a range of inter-disciplinary connections.

Unsurprisingly, open acknowledgement of fear in this context was more easily navigated in an online forum where discussion is primarily textual. On campus sessions saw more hesitancy, with students afraid of offending Muslim peers – although the lecturers' experience was that, rather than being offended, Muslim students were thankful for the opportunity to have such issues discussed, and their own fears recognised and addressed in an open forum.

Seen within all of these topics is the question: *What does it mean to be Australian?* which consequently asks: *What does it mean to be un-Australian?* Ideas relating to "land of the fair go" and "mateship" come up frequently in tutorial discussions, with some uncertainty around the extent to which living in a (relatively newly) multicultural nation can be defined as "Australian", and how the other identities claimed by students – British, Italian, Greek, Muslim – should be amalgamated. Each semester, we find that "competing narratives of Australia as a country of migrants and as a white nation" (Plage et al., 2016, p. 324) are persistent. Exploring cultural competency through the question of national identity asks students to consider notions of jingoism, cosmopolitanism, xenophobia and "othering" with the aim of, ultimately, returning to a central question of the unit: *What does it mean to be human?* with renewed empathy.

Conclusion

The findings of this article present a strong justification for the inclusion of humanities within a program such as UniPrep and, more broadly, within the national academic enabling environment. If the goal of enabling education is to provide students with the "knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Relf et al., 2017, p. 3) required for success in their undergraduate studies, then the development of critical thinking skills, cultural competency and an evolution of worldview all have a strong role to play. As a vehicle for fostering these developments, the humanities can be seen to nurture critical thinking by offering a grounding in ethics that, in turn, encourages a willingness in students to consider and evaluate multiple perspectives. Engagement in humanities content can also challenge the worldview of students as they encounter new perspectives from classmates, scholars and history. Investigation of these new perspectives, alongside an analysis of broader "ways of knowing" can also enhance the knowledge and application of cultural competency.

Although this study considered a significant body of student feedback in response to the unit, the findings are somewhat limited by the method of collection. As mentioned earlier, response rates to survey requests in UniPrep can hover around 20%, meaning that the experiences of many students may not have been not captured within this study. The responses that were captured by the study were also provided without specific questioning on any of the areas discussed within this research. This could be considered a positive attribute of the findings in that students offered their feedback without solicitation or direction, however, additional research in this area could potentially provide a deeper level of analysis via more specific and targeted surveys in the key areas of critical thinking, worldview, cultural competency, and other potential outcomes. Further research in relation to enabling programs that do not offer humanities-based content would also provide a valuable counterpoint to this discussion. However, for a relatively new and evolving field such as academic enabling, the findings within this article pose important questions about how best to prepare students for the challenges awaiting them in their undergraduate studies and beyond.

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