

**Teaching Aboriginal and Western approaches to management alongside each other: One approach for decolonising management education**

**Abstract**

Responding to calls to decolonise the management curriculum (Dar et al., 2021; Doucette et al., 2021, Woods et al. 2022), we present an activity for teaching Aboriginal and Western approaches to management alongside each other. Our approach is developing as part of a collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous management academics and is guided by Dyck's (2017) pedagogical framework which involves teaching diverse management approaches side-by-side. We help students identify the values of Individualism and Materialism that underpin the management discipline and present the values of Relationality and Caring for Country as equal and valid alternatives (Graham, 1999; Kwaymullina, 2005).

**Key Words:** Decolonising, Introductory Management, Aboriginal Philosophies

## **Teaching Aboriginal and Western approaches to management alongside each other: One approach for decolonising Management Education**

### **Introduction**

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics have identified a need to redress the colonial foundations of the business school curriculum which emphasises individualistic and materialist versions of management at the exclusion of other perspectives (Dyck & Schroeder, 2005; Pio & Waddock, 2021; Woods, Dell & Carroll, 2022). This involves decolonising the curriculum by challenging colonial power structures and making space for Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being in university courses (Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Woods et al., 2022). In contrast to previous efforts to decolonise which have focused on specialised courses like responsible management and Indigenous entrepreneurship (e.g. Gainsford & Evans, 2021; Nursey-Bray & Haugstetter, 2011; Woods et al., 2022; Young-Ferris & Voola, 2022), we outline an approach to teaching Aboriginal and Western approaches to management alongside each other in a generalist management course. Our approach is emerging from an ongoing collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and can be applied in small and large courses across the undergraduate and postgraduate management curriculum.

### **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.**

Our approach aligns with the broader movement to decolonise hegemonic knowledges linked to the colonial system and to the suite of wicked problems colonialism has created including entrenched racism, inequality and environmental degradation (Jones et al., 2023). Overcoming these challenges means understanding business schools as sites of ongoing colonisation that have historically suppressed or denied knowledges of Indigenous peoples,

women and other minorities (Dar et al., 2021; Doucette et al., 2021, Woods et al. 2022).

According to Woods et al. (2022), decolonisation involves two steps (1) dismantling colonial ideologies and power structures and (2) creating space for Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Decolonising business schools is challenging as inequality and discrimination is foundational to capitalism and universities, which are built on stolen land acquired through the forced removal of Indigenous people (Cooms, Watson & Leroy-Dyer, working paper). Thus, our approach is focused on mitigating ongoing harm and ensuring that we produce students who understand the colonial foundations of their education and who are capable of embracing the diversity in knowledge that exists (Cooms, Watson & Leroy-Dyer, working paper).

We draw inspiration from Bruno Dyck's pedagogical framework, which involves teaching diverse management approaches side-by-side (Dyck, 2017; Dyck & Neubert, 2010; Dyck, Caza, & Starke, 2018). Although Dyck and his Canadian colleagues (2022, 2023) teach a Social and Ecological Thought perspective<sup>1</sup> alongside the conventional management syllabus, in an Australian context we believe that Aboriginal (and/or) Torres Strait Islander philosophies provide the most compelling source for an alternative view of management. They offer a foundationally distinct way of knowing, being and doing from colonialism and can spark innovative and novel approaches in response to issues such as environmental degradation. Rooted firmly in the values of Relationality and Caring for Country (Graham, 1999; Kwaymullina, 2005) they offer a radically different alternative to the values of Individualism and Materialism that underpin the standard Western management curriculum (Dyck, 2017). Like knowledges originating in other colonised places (Gaio et al., 2023; Kothiyal, Bell & Clarke, 2018), Aboriginal knowledges directly challenge the hegemony of the globalised colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Social and Ecological Thought involves maximising social and ecological wellbeing while remaining financially viable.

knowledge system by providing alternative possibilities for management that are locally relevant.

By teaching Indigenous and Western knowledges together we hope to start the process of decolonisation by enhancing business students' critical engagement with diverse perspectives.

### **Learning Objectives**

As we are in the early stage of decolonising our introductory management course we have focused on two topics: 1) Management History and 2) Ethics and Social Inclusion. After completing the exercises students should:

1. Understand that the version of management presented in the textbook is not neutral but grounded in the values of Individualism and Materialism.
2. Understand the values of Relationality and Caring for Country that underpin many Aboriginal philosophies in Australia.
3. Apply the values of Relationality, Caring for Country, Individualism and Materialism in a management context.

Our aim is to present diverse perspectives to encourage students to question the source of the information they receive. We designed the exercises to help students consider their own assumptions about management and to open their eyes to the possibility of multiple “right” ways to manage at the entry point to their degree.

### **Exercise Overview**

We taught this exercise for the first time in Semester 1 2023 in a large first year introductory management course. It formed a small part of a 90-minute lecture held in a tiered lecture theater taught twice (original delivery and repeat) with class sizes of 400 and 550 students.

## Management History Lecture

Before the lecture, students read a standard textbook reading on Management History. In the lecture we present students with a padlet (an online “wall” for posting text and multimedia), which displays a conventional Management History timeline including biographical information about proponents of each theory (See Figure 1). We divide the class into three and gave them 2 minutes to consider one of three questions:

- 1) Where are the key figures in (this version) of management history from?
- 2) How many are women, men and non-binary?
- 3) What are their work/ disciplinary backgrounds?

When students report back it becomes clear that the key figures represented are men from North America and Europe with backgrounds in engineering, science, management and psychology.

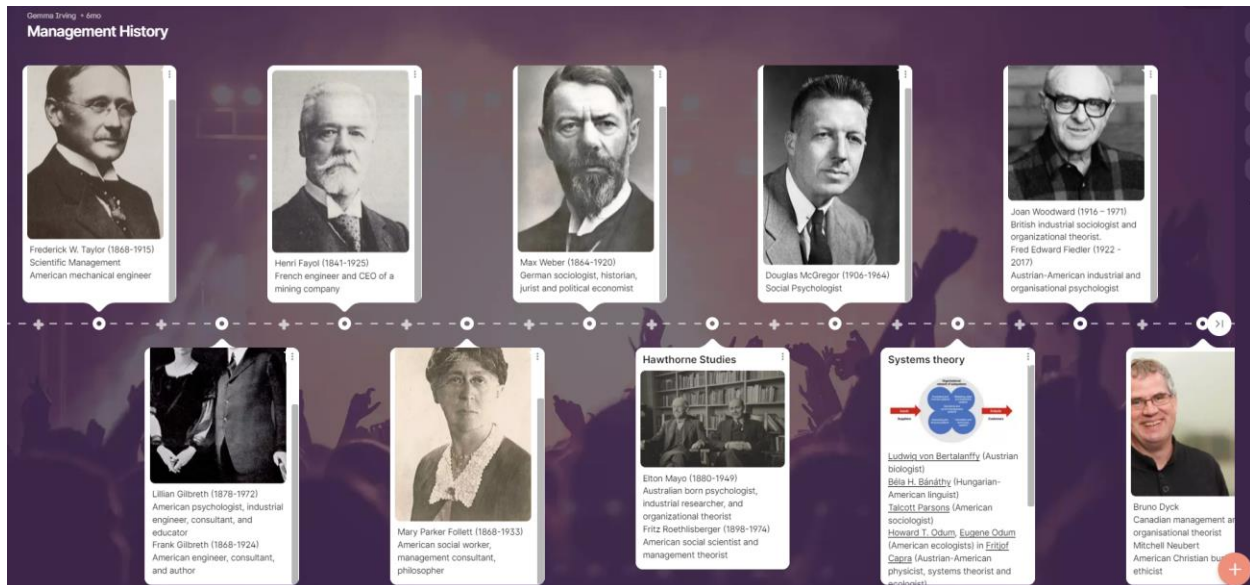
We explain that while these figures have made important contributions to the field of management, the discipline is limited by the exclusion of women, people of color, unionists, small business owners and others who are likely to have different perspectives on management <sup>2</sup>.

We explain that although the textbook presents Management History as neutral and value-free, it is grounded in the values of Individualism and Materialism. We briefly explain how these values manifest in Management History and in the text-book definition of management. We then draw on the work of Graham (1999) and Kwaymullina (2005) to describe alternative values of Relationality and Caring for Country that have their origins in Aboriginal

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<sup>2</sup> To reinforce the lack of diversity in the discipline, we show students Cummings, et al. (2017, pg. 3) distorted map of the world which depicts the geographic focus of articles from three Business History Journal. This map visually represents the domination of the USA and UK in scholarly conversations about management history.

Philosophies<sup>3</sup>. We present these values as the basis for an alternative version of management that is focused on building the best relationships possible, including with the natural environment.



**FIGURE 1:** Padlet showing key figures in Management History

We then ask students to imagine they are a manager deciding on a new remote work policy. We give students 5 minutes to talk with someone next to them or individually reflect on the following questions and post their responses on a padlet.

- 1) Based on the values of Relationality and Caring for Country, how would you make the decision and what factors would influence your decision?
- 2) Based on the values of Individualism and Materialism, how would you make the decision and what factors would influence your decision?

<sup>3</sup> In doing this, we first acknowledge the presence of more than 600 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereign nations speaking around 250 languages (Dixon, 2010). We explain that while these nations are diverse in terms of languages, culture and geography, they have some values in common. This is similar to the idea of Individualism and Materialism as shared “Western Values” which are common to Americans, Germans and Australians (for example), but which manifest slightly differently in each culture.

Some example answers to Question 1 include that managers should use consensus decision-making, consider impacts on interconnectedness, inclusivity and the natural environment, create consistent rules for managers and employees and give employees time to spend with family and on Country. In terms of Question 2, students emphasised the importance of preserving individual choice, meeting organisational goals and maximising productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

### Ethics and Social Inclusion Lecture

In the lecture on Ethics and Social Inclusion, we spend 10 minutes discussing media reports showing declining trust in corporations in light of unethical behavior (see Hutchins, 2023). We then return to the values of Individualism and Relationality, asking students to consider how their own values shape their interactions with others. Do they assume others seek to maximise their own self-interest (Individualism) or cooperate (Relationality)? We then step the whole class through “The Evolution of Trust” simulation (Case, 2017), which takes about 30 minutes.

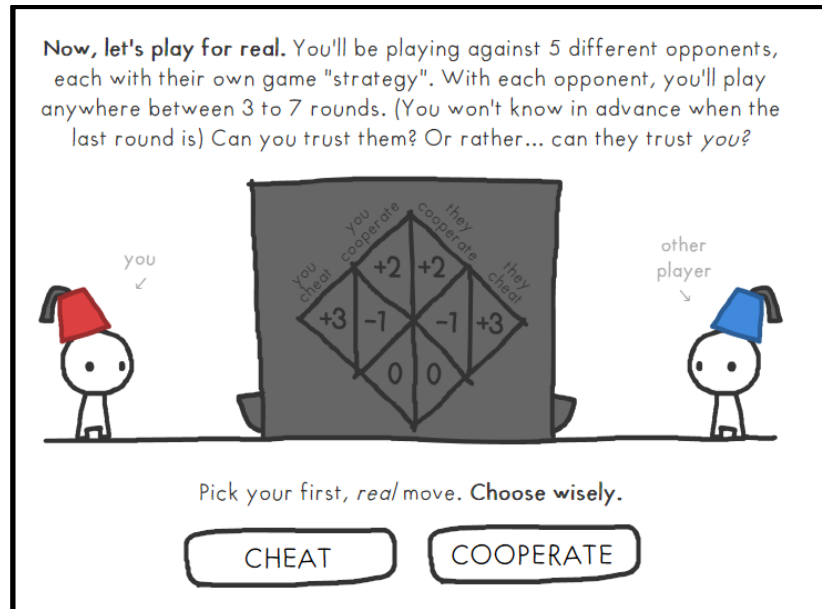
The open-source simulation is based around the Prisoner's Dilemma thought experiment, where individuals can choose to cooperate for the benefit of both parties or cheat their partner to maximise self-interest. In the simulation, the class (represented by 1 character in the simulation) plays a simple game with different possible outcomes (See Figure 4)<sup>4</sup>. Mutual gains are possible if both players cooperate, but there is an incentive to cheat (assuming the other player cooperates). In Part 1 of the simulation, the class plays against five characters with different strategies (e.g. always cheat, always cooperate, copy whatever the other player does) and in Part

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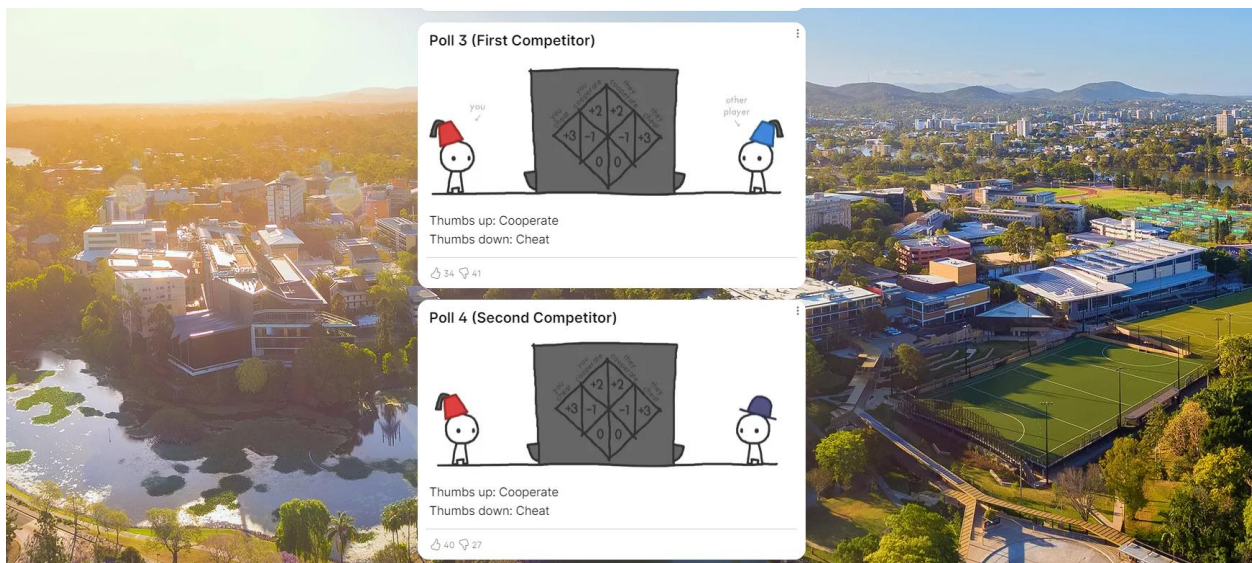
<sup>4</sup> Four possible outcomes of each decision round:

1. If the class and the other player both cooperate by putting a coin in the machine, both players get three coins (class: 3 coins back minus 1 coin in = net gain of 2 coins).
2. If the class cheats and the other player cooperates, the class gets 3 coins and the other player gets 0 coins (class: 3 coins back minus 0 coins in = net gain of 3 coins).
3. If the class cooperates and the other player cheats, the class gets 0 coins and the other player gets 3 coins and vice versa. (class: 0 coins back minus 1 coin in = net loss of 1 coin).
4. If the class and the other player both cheat, both players get 0 coins (class: 0 coins in plus 0 coins back = net gain/loss of 0 coins).

2 they play in different scenarios (e.g. multiple rounds, eliminating losers/ reproducing winners, miscommunication). Before each round, the class votes on whether to cooperate or cheat using a padlet (See Figure 5).



**FIGURE 4:** Screenshot from “The Evolution of Trust” simulation showing the gains/losses for each outcome (you cheat/they cheat: 0, you cheat/they cooperate: 3, you cooperate/ they cheat: -1, you cooperate/they cooperate: 2)



**FIGURE 5:** Padlet where students can vote Thumbs up (to cooperate) or Thumbs Down (to cheat) or against different competitors in “The Evolution of Trust” simulation



Although we did not debrief this activity, in future offerings we plan to pause the simulation after Part 1 to ask two questions. We will give students 5 minutes to talk with someone next to them or individually reflect, before posting their responses on a padlet.

- 1) Which strategy is consistent with the value of individualism (i.e. always cheat, always cooperate, copy whatever the other player does)? Explain your reasoning.
- 2) Which strategy is consistent with the value of relationality (i.e. always cheat, always cooperate, copy whatever the other player does)? Explain your reasoning.

We anticipate that students might associate individualism with a “cheating” strategy or a “copy” strategy that involves cooperating until the partner cheats to maximise individual self-interest. Although they might note that individualism involves considering long-term self-interest which is also consistent with a cooperate strategy. We anticipate students might associate relationality with a cooperative strategy. Although when confronted with a partner who “always cheats” a player coming from a relational perspective will be exploited unless they change their strategy to protect themselves.

Part 2 of the simulation involves playing multiple rounds (which involves eliminating losers/ reproducing winners) and simulating miscommunication. We step through the simulation to demonstrate the following points:

- Repeated interactions favours cooperation and trust, while fewer interactions favours cheating.
- Reducing the payoff for cooperating leads to more cheating.
- Seeking win-wins leads to cooperation and trust, while assuming life is a zero-sum game fosters cheating.

- A few mistakes/ miscommunication lead to forgiveness, while a lot of mistakes and miscommunication lead to widespread mistrust.

Although we did not debrief this activity, in future offerings we plan to ask students to reflect on the examples of unethical behaviour mentioned at the beginning of the lecture. In light of what they have learnt in the simulation, why is public trust in corporations in decline? We will divide the class into four and give them 5 minutes to consider one of four questions. We will instruct them to talk with someone next to them or individually reflect, before posting their responses on a padlet.

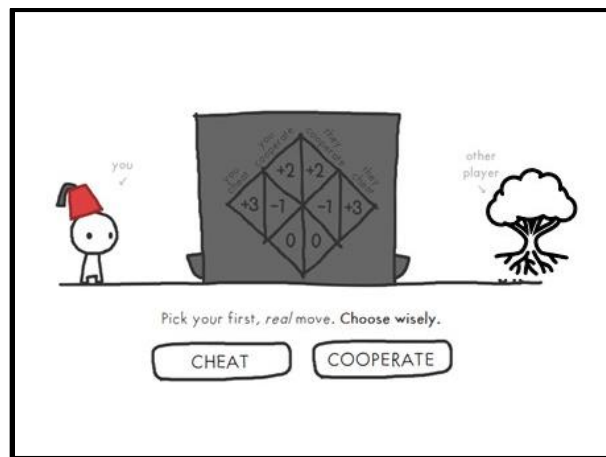
Can you think of examples where corporations (or governments) make decisions that serve to:

- 1) Reduce repeated (face-to-face) interactions?
- 2) Punish cooperation or reward cheating?
- 3) Assume someone must lose for another person to win (or fail to seek out win-wins)?
- 4) Allow mistakes or miscommunication to thrive?

We anticipate students might provide examples like gig economy workers interacting with colleagues, managers and customers via apps (1), debates that frame economic and environmental outcomes as trade-offs (3), minor fines/ limited consequences for corporations that break the law (2/4), or social media platforms that allow miscommunication/ fake news/ extreme views to proliferate (4).

We wrap up the activity with the idea that “the game defines what the players do”, which means that the values that underpin organisations and economies impact trust, ethical behaviour

and social inclusion. To foster trust individuals and organisations need to build relationships, seek win-wins and communicate clearly. We ask students to consider whether Aboriginal philosophies might provide insights on how to achieve this. Finally, we point out that the simulation has a human-centric view on ethical behaviour and a reward system based on the value of Materialism (i.e. money). If the simulation incorporated the value of Caring for Country, then nature (e.g. plants, animals, rocks, fungi) would be included as a “player” in the game (See Figure 6). From this perspective ethical behavior involves cooperating with the natural environment rather than cheating (exploiting) it.



**FIGURE 6:** Modified image from the simulation encouraging students to reflect on the value of Caring for Country.

### Session Description

We will run the activity as described above, asking participants to answer the same questions as our students. We will then outline our experience of running this activity with students and provide time for participants to ask questions, provide feedback and discuss next steps for decolonising the course.

| Timing     | Activity  | Participation  |
|------------|---|--|
| 0-4 mins   | Introduction  | Nil (Instructor-led).  |
| 5-14 mins  | Management History Exercise   | Review management history timeline and answer questions.<br>Answer debrief questions.              |
| 15-44 mins | Ethics and Social Inclusion<br>Simulation                                   | Participate in simulation by voting on whether to cooperate or cheat.<br>Answer debrief questions. |
| 45-49 mins | Instructor reflections on what we learnt (what worked and what didn't work) | Nil (Instructor-led).  |
| 50-60 mins | Feedback from participants  | Ask questions and provide feedback on the session.   |

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